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Op-ed

The US - China - Africa nexus under a Biden administration

By Daryl Swanepoel

When the Biden administration assumes office on 20 January 2021, Africa hopes to exit the awkward diplomatic state of affairs presented by the current Trump administration's laissez faire, even disparaging, attitude towards the continent, and the conundrum caused by the US – China squabble over the coronavirus and trade. It hopes for a reset of relations to those pre-2016. What do analysts expect?

Reinvigorating the US – Africa engagement

It is really under the Clinton administration that a sustained US – Africa engagement was developed. It deepened under both Presidents Bush and Obama, during which period the US agenda in Africa experienced remarkable bipartisan support in both the Congress and the White House.

Over the past two decades, Africa's share of annual US foreign assistance funding [increased](#) markedly, with annual aid fluctuating between USD 7 billion and USD 8 billion. Notable programmes receiving funding included Clinton's Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, Bush's Presidential Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR) and Obama's Power Africa and Trade Africa programmes. In turn, President Trump's "America First" foreign policy, sadly meant them, to large extent, disengaging with Africa.

Whilst Biden did not materially deal with Africa during the election campaign, Africa can take its lead from Biden's stance towards the African-American constituency, which were key to his bid to make America more of a nation that 'belongs to all who live in it, united in its diversity'.

The Biden-Harris Agenda for the African diaspora suggests a resetting of the US – Africa engagement pre the Trump pause, indeed, it may even be bolder. It asserts, amongst others, America's commitment to shared prosperity, peace and security, democracy, and governance as foundational principles of U.S.- Africa engagement, and the restoration and reinvigoration of diplomatic relations with African governments and regional institutions, including the African Union.

Biden of course has a personal history defending Africa, and particularly South Africa during the apartheid days. He has for many years served on the US Senate's Foreign Policy Committee, and has visited Africa many times. He understands the continent.

It is therefore quiet conceivable that the US will reinvigorate the Obama-era policies towards Africa – in particular, the signature Power Africa project, which was essentially abandoned by the Trump administration. There is also almost certainty that positive movement will be seen in the AGOA discussions, especially important given that it comes to an end in 2025.

That said, African expectations will need to be tempered. Whilst US interest in Africa is bound to increase, it should not be expected to top the agenda. The Biden-administration has many fences to mend, with those of its ally, Europe, and major competitors, such as Russia and China, requiring significant attention. The onus will in fact be on Africa to position itself as an active driver of the US-Africa relationship.

The US-China-Africa triangular construct

Perhaps the time is now ripe to encourage US - China trilateral discussion on African issues. There is much to be gained by cooperation in the fields of public health, maritime safety, and even with regard to military and policing matters, where cross-regional coordination is proving vital in both the domestic and international interest. One need look no further than the current impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which knows no border, thereby necessitating global collaboration amongst friend and foe.

Some Chinese and American diplomats have in the past promoted the idea of the two sides being responsive to the African agenda. They are of the belief that though competitors, they should strive for win-win-win outcomes. The recent establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area presents itself as a strategic opportunity to do so.

There have been some moves towards greater US – China cooperation, with suggestions for the United States and China to work in complementary ways in Africa. An example being their shared interest in Africa's stability. Other promising areas for potential trilateral cooperation include regional economic and infrastructure integration, joint work to address corruption, and mechanisms to support commerce, which could, amongst others, include a unified approach to local content provisions.

Whether that is still possible in the wake of the escalated Sino-American tensions, remains to be seen. Africa, it is supposed, will take its cue from Biden's ability to lead America back into the realm of multilateral engagement. The prospect therefore is, however, brighter today than yesterday.

Finally, the real question is how Africa is going to respond as a collective to the Biden administration. They need to act in a comprehensive and cohesive manner, by developing an African position as regards its expectations from the new US regime. In developing that response, it will have to look at what is in its interest. It should avoid falling into the trap of, in a sense, reliving the cold war, by choosing sides. Africa will have to put its terms on the table and find a way to constructively work with both sides in a manner that best serves its interests.

Conclusion

Africa has, in the last decades, enjoyed good relationships with both the United States and China, albeit on distinctly parallel tracks. This has greatly aided economic growth and stability on the African continent, whilst simultaneously advancing global development and sustainability. The relationship with China has, in the last four years continued to blossom; with the United States it has, however, in large measure, paused.

The approaching Biden administration presents a unique opportunity, not only for the US to revive and bolster its relationship with Africa, but for it to also take a fresh approach in its engagement with Africa. In recommitting the US to multilateralism, the potential exists for the US to reposition itself as both competitor and collaborator, thereby enabling themselves to acquire their fair share of the opportunities that abound in Africa. Such competition would bode well for the continent.

Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute. This article captures the essence of a recent panel discussion hosted by the institute to consider African expectations from the US's incoming Biden administration.