

## POLICY MEMO

## Recalibrating US-Africa Policy

BY JAMES BARNETT

*Research Fellow, Hudson Institute**December 2020*

The Look Ahead Series is a collection of policy memos examining the challenges that political, military, and business leaders must contend with today to ensure a secure, free, and prosperous world tomorrow.

For better or worse, US-Africa policy will not be an urgent priority for the Biden-Harris administration when it takes office in January. Domestic challenges, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and attendant economic crisis, will dominate the administration's focus from day one. In the realm of foreign affairs, issues ranging from transatlantic relations to East Asian security are likely to command the attention of administration officials during its first months in office.

Nevertheless, the day-to-day demands of the executive branch should hopefully not distract the new administration from the many challenges and opportunities Africa presents to US foreign policy. Some of these challenges are already being discussed in Washington, at least in broad terms. China's continued efforts to build influence across Africa and the expansion of Salafi-jihadi insurgencies in various parts of the continent have been on the radar of US policymakers for several years.

However, an exclusive focus on easily identifiable enemies and competitors misses the situation's big picture and carries significant risks. Many of the impediments to US foreign policy in Africa are rooted in larger structural and ideological

issues that Washington has little ability to affect in the short-term. Similarly, a black-and-white view of international politics elides the many ways external interventions impact Africa. For example, several of Washington's Middle Eastern partners have waged proxy conflicts in East Africa that are detrimental to regional stability and, by extension, US interests.

A better approach to US-Africa relations must begin, first and foremost, with a deeper understanding of the continent's complex politics and its role within the wider international system.

### Addressing National Security Priorities in Africa

#### China: Not Leaving Africa Anytime Soon

Over the past several years, Africa has increasingly been drawn into the global contest between the US and China. This trend looks set to continue for the foreseeable future. Since the turn of the millennium, China has invested heavily in Africa in search of profit, natural resources, and diplomatic clout. In some countries, strong relations with China date back to the Cold War, when Beijing supported various African anti-colonial movements in their liberation struggles. China opened its

first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, underscoring China's view of Africa through a strategic lens. Beijing seems to see East Africa in particular as an extension of its wider strategy for projecting power across the Indo-Pacific. As a result, China's presence is deeply entrenched in the continent.<sup>1</sup>

To be fair, Western critics have often overstated the extent to which the US has “withdrawn” from Africa. In fact, the US remains the largest donor of humanitarian aid globally, one of the top sources of foreign direct investment in Africa, the largest financial contributor to United Nations peacekeeping missions (of which there are many in Africa), and the foreign power with the most troops stationed across the continent. The US could better leverage these commitments, play to its comparative advantages, and, in some instances, improve its messaging vis-à-vis the assistance and support it already provides many African societies. To the Trump administration's credit, its nascent program to offer loans to lure developing nations away from Huawei and ZTE networks is a step in the right direction.<sup>2</sup>

But it is just that—a step. Washington should not mistake its material assistance or military presence for “primacy” in Africa. The US is unlikely to significantly reduce China's influence on the continent anytime soon, as African states understandably seek to maximize their gains from both Washington and Beijing. In many areas, such as port development or the telecoms sector, China already enjoys a notable lead over the US.<sup>3</sup> Even if China were to dramatically reduce its investments in Africa, it would still hold a significant chunk of African debt for the foreseeable future. Any US strategy for competing with China or engaging Africa must be grounded in an honest assessment of how quickly and to what degree African states would be willing to distance themselves from Beijing.

For many years, US officials tended to underestimate the Chinese Communist Party's intentions and the challenges Beijing would pose to US foreign policy. As has often been the

case throughout history, there is now a risk of overcorrecting and assuming the US can and must challenge China at every turn across the globe. One need not adopt any rose-colored view of the Chinese Communist Party to recognize that there is a place for prudence and restraint in the grand strategy of the US when presented with a challenge as enormous as China's rise. As British critic of US foreign policy Patrick Porter warns, the return of great-power competition calls for “cool heads, not cheery buccaneers.”<sup>4</sup>

### Salafi-jihadi Terror in Africa

Concern over the expansion of Salafi-jihadi insurgencies in Africa, many of which are affiliated with either al Qaeda or the Islamic State, has heavily colored US foreign policy toward the continent over the past two decades—overly so at some points. African Salafi-jihadi groups do not presently appear to pose much of a direct threat to the US homeland, though this could change, and several have targeted US interests in Africa, including US embassies and citizens. Moreover, the US has an interest in avoiding further violence and destabilization at the hands of Salafi-jihadi groups across the continent.

The Salafi-jihadi challenge in Africa requires a measured assessment of each group's capabilities and intentions, the resources the US is willing and able to commit to confront the issue, and the political and humanitarian ramifications of external interventions aimed at confronting the threat. This last element has often been overlooked in policy debates, which tend to focus on abstract discussions of governance and state fragility rather than the specific political contexts within which Salafi-jihadi groups operate. As RAND's Michael Shurkin writes in reference to Operation Barkhane, a US-supported French counterterrorism campaign in the Sahel, “The French military is limiting itself to focusing on security in the anticipation that others will do the political work. This is complicated by the fact that the French presence constitutes a political intervention, even as the French strive to avoid political interference.”<sup>5</sup>

If the US hopes to reduce Salafi-jihadi violence in Africa, however marginally, it must be open to rethinking the conventional wisdom that has dominated the “war on terror” since 2001. A light US military footprint may be needed in places, but kinetic operations can only do so much and may indeed exacerbate the underlying conditions of an insurgency. For example, under the Obama and Trump administrations, the US ramped up drone strikes in Somalia against the al Qaeda-affiliated al Shabaab organization.<sup>6</sup> While these strikes often have tactical or operational value—like disrupting an al Shabaab assault or removing a mid-level commander—they leave unaddressed the political, social, and ideological factors that allow al Shabaab to sustain its brutal campaign.

## Beyond Enemies and Competitors: Unconventional Challenges Facing US-Africa Relations

### Diplomacy without the Nation State

The largest challenges the US faces in Africa—and, more importantly, that many African states face themselves—are structural and ideological. Africa’s borders have not changed much since the onset of colonialism in the late 19th century, when European powers carved up the continent with minimal consideration of indigenous realities, dividing many communities while lumping others into arbitrary administrative units. It was often colonial practice to divide and coopt various ethnic groups or even redefine or create ethnic or “tribal” identities for the purposes of administration.<sup>7</sup> Many post-colonial African elites have continued to perpetuate ethnic or regional divisions for political ends.<sup>8</sup>

All to say, in many parts of Africa, though certainly not all, one’s regional, religious, or ethnic identity—the latter of which is often understood as a national identity in its own right—is likely to trump one’s identification with any internationally recognized polity.

This proves a challenge for US diplomacy, which has historically been geared toward engaging nation-states in which the central government enjoys legitimacy and effectively asserts its authority within its borders.<sup>9</sup> Given that many African states do not fit that description, high-level, centralized diplomacy has its drawbacks or, at the very least, is insufficient to build truly robust ties across the continent. Individual efforts of many US diplomats notwithstanding, the State Department as a whole is not ideally structured for the type of decentralized diplomacy needed to engage with powerbrokers outside the central government, be they faith leaders, traditional rulers, or local politicians. Restrictions on the movement of US diplomatic personnel following the 2012 attack on a State Department compound in Benghazi have further limited the abilities of US diplomats to operate outside embassy confines, particularly in the more insecure parts of the continent. This inhibits their ability to engage with civil society and community leaders outside the capitol.

Moving forward, the US will need to be creative to conduct diplomacy that reflects African realities. At minimum, this will require rethinking some of the risk-mitigation measures the State Department has taken since 2012.

### Synchronizing Africa and Middle East Policies

Many of Washington’s Middle Eastern partners, specifically Turkey, Egypt, and the Gulf states, present yet another overlooked challenge for US policy in Africa. Since 2017, Turkey and Qatar have increasingly competed for influence across the wider Middle East with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt. That latter group is motivated in large part by opposition to Turkey and Qatar’s support for Muslim Brotherhood-aligned groups. The Horn of Africa has emerged as a notable arena of zero-sum proxy competition between these powers.<sup>10</sup>

The civil war in Libya offers the most dramatic example of how these Middle Eastern rivalries can spill into Africa and

compound existing crises. Both Turkey and the UAE have deployed advanced combat drones in support of opposing factions within Libya.<sup>11</sup> Turkish President Erdogan has also dispatched several thousand Syrian mercenaries, some of whom are reportedly linked to al Qaeda or the Islamic State. UAE-backed warlord Khalifa Haftar employs hardline Salafi militias in his campaigns, underscoring how the country adopts a flexible approach toward Islamists when it suits its interests.<sup>12</sup>

The prospects of further proxy competition in the Horn of Africa have only increased over the past month with the outbreak of civil war in Ethiopia. In order to prevent Middle Eastern rivalries from exacerbating existing conflicts and tensions in the region, US policymakers need to understand that the divide between the Middle East and East Africa is arbitrary, and that the wider Red Sea region is deeply interconnected geopolitically. Given the many bureaucratic seams within the US government that reflect this notion of a Middle East-Africa divide—for example, AFRICOM covers all of continental Africa except Egypt, which is covered by CENTCOM—US officials should consider ways to improve interagency coordination on issues in the wider Red Sea arena.<sup>13</sup>

### Opportunities for Strengthening US-African Ties

It is all too easy to get caught up in the many problems Africa faces without considering the opportunities the US has to strengthen ties across the continent. Washington cannot afford to overlook Africa—and not only because of the national security reasons laid out above. Africa is the world's fastest growing continent in terms of population, it is home to multiple emerging markets, and its states are likely to have a larger say in international affairs moving forward. The much-touted “Africa Rising” narrative is simplistic and overly optimistic, but analyses that exclusively focus on the continent's troubles only tell part of the story.

The following are just a few areas in which the US could bolster ties with African states, strengthening its soft power in the process.

- Global Health:** Washington should look to bolster cooperation in the realm of global health. This issue has often been treated in policy circles as a one-way street, in which the US provides material and know-how to underdeveloped African states suffering from preventable diseases or pandemics. It is time to rethink that framing, especially in light of the relative, if uneven, success of many African states in battling the initial waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. We should not underestimate the poor quality of many African healthcare systems—and USAID should continue its work supporting public health across the continent—but we should also recognize those African countries, like Senegal, that have so far responded to COVID-19 with successful public health interventions.<sup>14</sup>
- Climate Policy:** African governments and regional organizations such as the African Union have increasingly warned of the risks of climate-related insecurity in recent years. Many African states face tremendous challenges from climate change, including desertification or rising sea levels, though the continent as a whole contributes a far smaller share of global greenhouse gas emissions than countries like China, the US, and India.<sup>15</sup> This has created a sense among many African elites that global powers should be doing more to address climate change. As Africa's population grows and the continent industrializes, environmental challenges will further proliferate across the continent. Taking a more proactive stance on climate change alongside African governments would signal to Africans that Washington is sensitive to their concerns while potentially laying the groundwork for more sustainable development agendas.
- Urbanization:** African metropolises are set to grow dramatically in the coming decades, shifting the balance between urban and rural populations in many states and transforming African societies in the process. The US should orient its diplomacy and assistance to take advantage of this trend of urbanization. For example, Judd Devermont of the Center for Strategic and International



Studies argues that the US could strengthen the sister-city program as a low-cost investment in African urbanization.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

Washington's approach to Africa need not be stuck in the intellectual and strategic frameworks of the past. New

policies and dialogues are possible if the US recognizes Africa's importance within broader global affairs and seeks a clearer understanding of the challenges and opportunities the continent presents. While it will presumably not be a priority during the new administration's first 100 days, a rethink of US-Africa policy is long overdue.

## Endnotes

- 1 For more on China's influence in Africa, see James Barnett, "The 'China Dream' and the African Reality: The Role of Ideology in PRC-Africa Relations," Hudson Institute, October 2020.
- 2 Stu Woo, "U.S. to Offer Loans to Lure Developing Countries Away from Chinese Telecom Gear," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 18, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-offer-loans-to-lure-developing-countries-away-from-chinese-telecom-gear-11603036800>.
- 3 Eric Olander, "Worrying About Huawei in Africa Misses the Bigger Issue," *The China Africa Project*, November 2, 2020, <https://chinaafricaproject.com/analysis/worrying-about-huawei-in-africa-misses-the-bigger-issue/>.
- 4 Patrick Porter, "Power Plays," *The Critic*, October 2020, <https://thecritic.co.uk/issues/october-2020/power-plays/>.
- 5 Michael Shurkin, "France's War in the Sahel and the Evolution of Counter-Insurgency Doctrine," *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 1 (2020).
- 6 "US airstrikes in the Long War," *Long War Journal*, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/us-airstrikes-in-the-long-war>.
- 7 For more, see Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).
- 8 In many instances this has taken the form of portraying one ethnic group as more fully "national" or "indigenous" than others—the Rwandan genocide being probably the most well-known example of this concept taken to the extreme. See Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
- 9 John Campbell, "U.S. Africa Policy Needs a Reset," *Foreign Affairs*, October 12, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2020-10-12/us-africa-policy-needs-reset>.
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- 12 Sam Magdy, "Turkey deploys extremists to Libya, local militias say," *AP*, February 5, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/91fe-ba2d2b530e471721b2dc285e69bf>; and "Addressing the Rise of Libya's Madkhali Salafis," International Crisis Group, April 15, 2019, [www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/addressing-rise-libyas-madkhali-salafis](http://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/addressing-rise-libyas-madkhali-salafis).
- 13 For more recommendations for improving coordination within the US foreign policy bureaucracy, see "Final Report and Recommendations of the Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena," United States Institute of Peace, October 2020.
- 14 Ben Lee and Catherine Winn, "Localized communication plan helps Senegal control COVID-19," *Africa in Focus*, Brookings Institute, November 10, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2020/11/10/localized-communication-plans-help-senegal-control-covid-19/>.
- 15 "Developing Countries Are Responsible for 63 Percent of Current Carbon Emissions," Center for Global Development, August 8, 2015, <https://www.cgdev.org/media/developing-countries-are-responsible-63-percent-current-carbon-emissions>.
- 16 Judd Devermont, "A New U.S. Policy Framework for the African Century," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2020.



## About the Author

### **James Barnett**

*Research Fellow, Hudson Institute*



James Barnett is an independent researcher and writer specializing in African security issues. He was previously a Public Interest Fellow at the Hudson Institute and an analyst at AEI's Critical Threats Project. He has also worked with the United States Institute of Peace as lead researcher and writer for the final report of the Senior Study Group on the Red Sea and as a research assistant at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies. He was a 2016-2017 Boren Scholar in Tanzania and has been awarded a Fulbright research grant for Nigeria for 2020-21. He holds a B.A. with Highest Honors in History and Plan II Liberal Arts Honors from the University of Texas at Austin and is currently pursuing an MA in War Studies at King's College London.

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### **Hudson Institute**

1201 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Fourth Floor  
Washington, D.C. 20004

+1.202.974.2400  
[info@hudson.org](mailto:info@hudson.org)  
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