

Out of Africa: A Steady American Disengagement*

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Introduction

A part from a military base located near Djibouti, two dozen troops contributing in the United Nations Stabilizing Mission in Mali (Minusma) and a few hundreds of soldiers and experts providing logistic, training and assistance for some countries fighting terrorism such as the Sahel-Saharan States, America's military presence in Africa has been drastically reduced particularly since the failure of the operation "Restore hope" badly conducted in Somalia in 1993 for, allegedly, humanitarian purposes. Many American companies have withdrawn from the Black continent, US global trade with African countries has diminished and the contingency to use the oil resources of West Africa in order to lessen the dependency on the energy resources of the Middle East has also become almost obsolete because of the discovery of large deposits of oil and gas shales in the American continent.

The reasons of US African "demise" are multifarious and hard to grasp meaningfully regarding the complexities of the Black continent, the ambivalences of US foreign policy, the divergences of views among American decision-makers and the strategies carried out by rival powers to counter US interests in Africa.

The political discourse since the end of the cold war has been focused on the necessity to reorient US foreign policy towards the Pacific-Asia region where are located the supposedly main contenders of US global design, i.e.,

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China India, and Japan as well as the nuclear- potentially dangerous powers such as North Korea, Pakistan and Iran. Besides, US disinterest in Africa was explained by the continuous instability, the spread of radical Islam and terrorism, the expansion of poverty, corruption and the persistence of diverse pandemics in this continent.

Still, the US gradual withdrawal from Africa could be apprehended in the contemptuous designation unleashed by President Trump when he depicted in 2018 some countries of the Southern hemisphere as “shitholes.” However, the new approach incepted by the Trump administration in the framework of America’s dealings with the outer world does not concern exclusively the relations of the US with Africa but includes a new perception that aims at reducing the engagements of America towards its foreign partners. The aim intended to reduce the burdens provoked by the assistance provided by Washington to other countries, whether in terms of financial inducements or security arrangements.

There is no doubt that President Trump has targeted Africa in particular on the basis that this continent has benefited from US assistance with no substantial gains in return and that a number of US special forces troops were the victims of terrorist groups in the Horn of Africa in the 1990s and in Niger (Sahel region) in October 2018. As Africa started to stand low in US agenda or in its future world designs, the Trump administration incepted some initiatives that supported US desire to disentangle from this region, whether with regard economic issues or military involvement. As examples, trade agreements with some African countries were depicted as unfair to the US, the funding of the economic and social projects incepted by these countries was substantially restricted and the already small military presence of America in Africa may be reduced.

It remains that US-intended withdrawal from Africa has been regarded by many political scientists as detrimental to America’s national interests

and therefore, a reset of its relations with African countries may need to be implemented.

The dramatic departure of Trump from the White House in January 2021 may, hopefully, leave the way for a new US-African relationship that may bring mutual advantages for both parties.

1 – Declining Trade Exchanges and Military Engagement

1.1 – Dipping Trade Exchanges

The review of US trade with Africa since the end of the cold war reveals a downsizing trend even though the rhetoric of successive administrations has exalted the efforts to strengthen trade exchanges with this continent and contribute in eradicating the burdens of poverty, illiteracy and pandemics from which many African countries have suffered for decades.

It seems also that the concerns of American leaders consisted in preserving the stability of countries without, however, promoting democracy, human rights and good governance, thus, turning their back on the intrinsic and basic values on which the civilization of the United States has been built, ever since the independence of this country in 1776.

The end of the Cold War resulted in the disappearance of the East-West logics of confrontation in which the US provided its African liberal allies and autocratic rulers political support, arms and financial allowances in order to contain the spread of communism and break down the progressive regimes that existed in Africa.

The temptation to preserve a strong foot in Africa withered away after the fiasco recorded by the military engagement of America through the operation “Restore Hope” carried out under the George H. Bush administration at the end of 1992, for allegedly humanitarian purposes.

This misfortune came in a conjecture where the United States was revising its leadership over the post-cold war world affairs. As a result, America’s

foreign policy became less tempered ideologically and its designs in Africa remained confined in trading and in containing supposed threats to US security that may come from this region. Thus, economic interests and security concerns became the top priority inscribed on the external agenda of the United States. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) set up in 2004, provided some African countries with substantial funds to reduce poverty through sustainable economic growth Programmes. The experiments of famine disasters in Somalia in the early 1990, social consequences of conflicts in the Great Lakes region, Liberia Sierra Leone and Somalia and the painful transition to free-market economies have induced the American administrations to contribute in the developmental projects initiated in some African countries that have apparently embarked upon economic reforms.

As a result, the volume of US aid grew from \$670 million in 1996 during the first mandate of President Clinton to a level that oscillated between 7 to 8 \$ billion annually during the Obama and Trump mandates.

The involvement to assist developmental efforts of some African countries aimed evidently at enhancing their trade exchanges with the United States. Therefore, several programmes initiated by successive American administrations have targeted the increase of trade exchanges. The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) set up in 2000 under Clinton's tenure provided selected African countries with duty-free access to the US market for a large list of products. Thus, tariff free access was granted to 6,900 products from 39 African countries.

Bilateral trade agreements were signed with African countries such as the Trade and Investment Framework Agreements (TIFAs) and the US Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) was extended to North African States which were also included in The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). All of these agreements provided strategic frameworks and principles for dialogue on trade and investment issues.

US Trade with Africa (Selected years) in US \$ millions

	1999	2000	2017	2019
Imports	9,880.1	24,329.5	22,066.3	26,722.1
Exports	16,990.1	62,403.6	33,410.1	30,213.5
Balance	-7,110	-38,074.1	-11,343.8	-3,491.4

Source: United States Census Bureau.

As the Table shows, US trade with Africa has grown from roughly U\$ 26.7 billion in 1999 to around \$56 billion in 2019. It reveals, however, that it has substantially dipped during the 2017-2019 (President Trump's first years in office). Conversely, the trade balance has been in favour of the African States which provide the United States with raw materials, mainly oil and metals in exchange for equipment, industrial products and food stuffs.

In comparison, China's trade with Africa has increased from \$10 billion in 2000 to reach \$210 billion in 2014, but it declined to \$192 billion in 2019 because of the impact of the world economic recession on Chinese economy.² Russia's trade with Africa remains behind the Chinese and American levels as it stood at only \$20 billion in 2019.³

In confirmation of the fact that Africa receives lower Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) than any other region in the world and as a good example of US disengagement in Africa on the economic level, it is noteworthy to mention that American FDI substantially decreased from a peak of

² China -Africa research Initiative, [sai-cari.org/ data-china-trade](http://sai-cari.org/data-china-trade).

³ Afreximbank.com/Russia-africa-trade-has-doubled-since-engagement-says-afreximbank-chef/.

\$69.03 billion in 2014 to \$43.19 billion in 2019.⁴ In the meantime, China's investments in Africa have surged from \$ 75 million in 2003 to \$ 2.3 billion in 2019, but they remain far behind American direct inflows to Africa. Besides, US loans to African countries were drastically reduced while China's lending in Africa has substantially increased from 2010 to reach % 116 billion in 2017.

To sum up, Africa represents less than 1% of total of US foreign direct investments abroad and only 1.2 % of all US exports in 2017.

1.2 – Security Predicament: High Concerns, Downgrading Military Involvement

US military engagement to help curbing conflicts in Africa moved from the logics of the cold war to tackle issues of human disasters, civil wars and terrorism but without intervening directly or engaging large-scale troops.

If the Clinton administration watched helplessly the genocide that occurred in Rwanda, it moved, afterwards, to set up the African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI) in 1996 that aimed at training and equipping troops of some African countries for a rapid deployment and for peacekeeping and humanitarian missions such as the cases of “ethnic” violence in Burundi and civil war in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

With the eruption of terrorism marked by the violent activities led by the *Shabab* jihadists in the Horn of Africa and the increase of attacks carried out by *Al-Qaeda* in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and *Boko Haram* in the Sahel-Sahara region from Northern Mali down to Nigeria, the United States refrained from engaging a direct military intervention such as the one carried out in 2013 by France in North Mali in the framework of Serval operation. It did not also insist to obtain military bases for AFRICOM in the

⁴ [statista.com/statistics/188594/united-states-direct-investments-inafrica-since-2001](https://www.statista.com/statistics/188594/united-states-direct-investments-inafrica-since-2001).

regions affected by the terrorist threat and opted for training and providing adequate equipment for African armies engaged in the fight of terrorism in the framework of Flintlock operation and the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP).

The United States may be relieved to see France play the role of the gendarme of the Western world in Africa, being aware not to open another military front along its adventurous and costly operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and which may further strain US budget and cause more American casualties.

The US was not also driven by the policy of countering the military interventions of rival great powers in Africa. In fact, Russia has refrained from intervening militarily in Africa, though it provides a support to the National Libyan Army (LNA) led by Marshall Haftar, a rival of the internationally recognized National Government Accord (GNA) in Libya. China came to set up a base in Djibouti to conduct anti-piracy operations around the Horn of Africa, but does not seem to engage in vast and long-lasting operations or meddle in the internal affairs of African countries like France did with regard the crises that occurred in the African Central Republic, Ivory Coast or Libya.

The Libyan case was a typical example of the US showing high security concerns and a mitigated military engagement. Indeed, the US took part in the NATO-UN-led military intervention in Libya and President Obama launched “operation Odyssey dawn” to assist the rebels hostile to the Gadhafi regime with air-strikes directed against the regular army. In the course of events marked by violent confrontation between the rival parties in Libya and increasing foreign interferences in this country, US position fluctuated between openly calling for an UN-sponsored political solution and supporting a direct military intervention in Libya. Although the Trump administration expressed a clear support to Haftar’s LNA which aimed at avoiding the control of Libya by Turkish-backed Islamist groups such as the *Islamic State* (ISIS) and *Nusra*, accused of attempting to get a hold

on the country's oil resources, it did not, however, immerse directly into the Libyan crisis in terms of sending troops on the ground as did Turkey, for instance. Trump's administration limited its operations in Libya to air strikes against the Jihadist militias as did Obama's army against Qadhafi troops in 2011.

On the multilateral level, the US under Trump administration started to pull out its troops from the U.N. peacekeeping missions in Mali and in South Sudan and question the utility of U.N. Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSA) which failed to conduct a referendum for self-determination of the Saharawi people, for nearly three decades. These decisions came after the critics expressed by John Bolton, the National Security Council Adviser under Trump's tenure, towards the deployment of U.N. peacekeepers in Africa as the "end of creative thinking" to resolve conflicts because as he stated, "the many more billions of U.S. tax dollars spent there over recent decades have failed to stop terrorism, radicalism and violence, nor have they prevented other powers from increasing their own power and influence".⁵

This disillusion over Africa's political and security upheavals as well as the mounting interference of other foreign powers in this continent, coupled with the quest to ensure "American interests first," may explain the move of the Trump administration to consider pulling out some troops that remained on the African soil. It seemed that the Trump administration became to consider Africa as a pawn in its declared great power competition with other Non-Western countries and that this competition has replaced counter-terrorism as its top priority in the region, according to the statement made by Secretary of Defense Esper in April 2020.⁶

⁵ Herman, Steve, December 13, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/usa/sweeping-change-us-policy-africa-announced>.

⁶ <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/does-America-need-an-African-Strategy/>.

French leaders may have been, probably upset by President Trump's project to withdraw some of US special troops that were assisting French troops in the operations carried out against terrorist groups activating in the Sahel region through Serval and then Barkane operations. Though appreciating intelligence, logistic and drone support to the French troops engaged in fighting terrorism in the Sahel region. The French President Macron did not conceal his regret to Trump's decision by asserting that "if the Americans were to decide to leave Africa, it would be bad news for us."⁷

2 – Neglecting African People's Thirst for Democracy

Critics of US approach to the issue of democracy and the respect of human rights have argued that the successive American administrations have conceived Africa through the prism of great power competition and through their attempts to preserve the stability of African countries in order to protect US economic and strategic interests. In defense of American leaders, it should be recalled that they have initiated democracy programmes to support elections, train legislators and strengthen the free press as well as civil society and democratic institutions in many African countries.

Still, the United States has kept a blind eye on the issues of political change and respect of human rights in Africa. It was not pleased by the toppling from power of the authoritarian regimes of Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt and Qadhafi in Libya. In contrast, it was not critical of the quelling by the Moroccan authorities of the popular uprising that hit the region of the Rif in 2018 and did not react to the demands raised by the popular or hirik movements that emerged in Sudan and Algeria in 2020 in order to seemingly ignite radical political reforms of in these two countries, after the downfall of their leaders. The American administrations remained silent on

⁷ France's Macron says US exit from West Africa would be bad news <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-sahel-usa-idUSKBN1ZC286>.

street demonstrations against proposals to make constitutional amendments to extend the mandates of incumbent presidents such as Joseph Kabila in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Alpha Condé in Guinea, Pierre Nkurunziza in Burundi and Blaise Campaoré in Burkina Faso. They did not also make much noises over the coups d'état incepted in Madagascar in 2009, Niger and Guinea-Bissau in 2012, Egypt and Mali in 2013. Obviously, all these coups did not bring to power progressive regimes or leaderships hostile to the United States.

By disengaging from Africa, especially under Trump's administration, the United States has left behind former colonial powers such as France, regional powers such as Rwanda, Ethiopia, Eritrea and rival powers such as China and Russia. All of these countries were neither tempted to promote democratic ideals, enhance peace capacity building or complete decolonization in Africa.

To be indulgent with US misperceptions of Africa, it may be useful to underline undemocratic practices, corruption, embezzlement which may explain the disillusion of even the pro- democracy in Africa among American decision-makers, public opinion and academics. There is a little doubt that the ruling elites in Africa have been largely responsible for their people's apathy to politics and lack of tolerance towards divergent options.

Recent events have proven that more and more Africans are pledging for the removal of long-lasting or autocratic regimes. As illustration, recent Afrobarometer surveys have revealed that 7 out of 10 Africans expressed preference for democracy and larger percentages rejected one-man (81%), single party (76%) and military rule (73%).⁸ This outcome seems in contradistinction with the case of Uganda, when a large portion

⁸ Gimah-Boadi, E, Signé, Landry and Appiah-US foreign Policy toward Africa: An African Citizen Perspective, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2020/10/23/us-foreign-policy-toward-africa-an-african-citizen-perspective/0>.

of voters rejected multipartism in favour of “an inclusive no-party, movement system” during a referendum held in 2000, perhaps as a result of manipulation and misinformation displayed by the central authorities in order to stay in power.

However, African population is young and vibrant and is more inclined to embrace democratic values than the ageing rulers that tried to remain in power even by constitutional trickery or rigging the elections. Thanks to new technologies of information and social networks, African youngsters may be eager and even better equipped to get access to modernity and participative democracy. The great bulk of street demonstrators against the extension of presidential mandates in Africa were youth and women. Many of them became mobilized and activists thanks to social networks which they handle with ease, accuracy and frequency. In many cases, the official authorities were not able to curb down political activism through internet and other communication supports.

Africans may have been relieved of some frustrations related to experiences of autocratic rulers when they came to watch the pathetic riots at the US Capitol following the refusal of President Trump to admit his defeat in the December 2020 Presidential contest. The US Capitol chaos was mocked by African bloggers and was regarded as a bad precedent for the forthcoming presidential elections in Ethiopia and Somalia. The case of Jacob Zuma was also recalled by a South African commentator when his former president made noises similar to those made by Trump ahead of being removed from power, but the South African military came out to enforce law and order. A Twitter user from Rwanda disclosed that “it is time for the African Union to send peacekeepers to protect American citizens!”⁹

⁹ Owusu, Francis, Carmody Padraig, Reborebo Ricardo, Trump’s legacy in Africa and what to expect from Biden, [https:// theconversation.com/trumps-legacy-in-africa-and-what-to-expect-from-biden-150293](https://theconversation.com/trumps-legacy-in-africa-and-what-to-expect-from-biden-150293).

To sum up, Afro optimists remind that there have been 34 peaceful transfers of power from one leader to another in 35 African countries since 2015, an outstanding performance in comparison to past experiences.

3 – A Reset of US-Africa Relations under Biden’s Tenure or the Policy of Déjà Vu?

In the ebbs and flows of American foreign policy, it may be highly unluckily that President Biden will attenuate the traditional rhetoric related to exceptionalism that considers America as “morally superior, unique and viscerally democratic nation,”¹⁰ as it may be also unlikely that the new administration will temper Trump’s emphasis on power competition with regard US foreign policy objectives. In this vein, it may not be hazardous or even superfluous to predict that Africa will still perceived in the prism of US completion with China in particular. In other term, the Africa continent will remain an object in American perceptions and not a responsible partner with which political dialogue, trade and security matters can be conducted on a win-win basis.

From the perspective of great power, it remains to what extent, the Biden Administration could maintain American challenge to exceed China’s investments, trade potential and lending capacities which this country has made available to Africa. Trump’s “Prosper Africa” programme meant to respond to China’s Belt and Road initiative did not achieve the objectives of doubling US investments and trade exchanges in Africa because of the lack of adequate funding.¹¹ In addition, encouraging free-trade with African countries may not enhance their capacities to produce competitive goods. What remains essential is to increase direct involvement of American

¹⁰ Hockenos, Paul, US exceptionalism is dead, long live US exceptionalism, *International Politics and Society*, 28, 01, 2021.

¹¹ Owusu, Francis and al, *Trump’s legacy*, op.cit.

companies through joint ventures that may achieve gradual transfer of technologies, particularly concerning innovative sectors of industry and transformation. Other great powers, in particular China have been heavily involved in building roads, ports, airports, oil and chemical plants and gained in return raw materials necessary for their growing industry and influence notably among African rulers.

Africa should not be regarded as a mere source of trouble and insecurity as it was emphasized particularly under Trump's reign. The continent has a real potential for development with regard its increasing population and economic resources. By 2050, one in every four persons in the world will be African and Nigeria will be the third most populous country in the world, surpassing the United States. Six of the 10 fastest growing economic in the world in 2018 were located in Africa and by 2030 this continent will boast a population of 1.7 billion people endowed with a consumer and business spending that will reach \$6.7 trillion by 2030.¹²

Political prospects in Africa are not that gloomy as the need for setting up democratic institutions and peaceful political transition may become more pressing. Terrorism may be also defeated by soft power means as more democratic regimes, empowered societies, spread of literacy would cut the grass-roots for radicalization and extremism. Improving health conditions of the African population may be also another requirement to enable economic development and peace and security. In this respect, the Biden administration, should continue and even increase its aid to annihilate pandemics in Africa, particularly in the context of the unprecedented public health challenge represented by the Covid-19.

¹² Signé, Landry, A Trump visit to Africa is important-and carries some urgency, <http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/atrump-visit-to-africa-is-important-and-carries-some-urgency,10/04/2019/>.

Biden's administration ought to pay heed to these imperatives, but it seems that the traditional logics on which the foreign policy of America is based may not permit a new vision towards the African continent. Great power competition may be pursued in the future, however, with less exuberance, public exposure and grandiloquence as it was the case with President Trump.

Becoming driven merely by the same objectives of economic growth, mercantile purposes and leadership as other non-democratic great powers should not conceal the fact that America has been also the object of envy for its human values, democratic ideals and care for its own people. "Make America great" may not mean only the strengthening of this country's military might, economic predominance and political hegemony. America can be and remain great by its moral fundamentals, the genius and innovative spirit of its culturally and ethically diversified people. These are the very ingredients, Africans would like to notice in American behaviour towards their continent and elsewhere. And these, are the recipes other great powers may not ostensibly or easily offer.

Conclusion

Certainly Africa suffers from serious political impairments, economic shortcomings and social distortions, but in many cases the negative aspects have been the result of corrupt and repressive regimes some of which were also backed by the United States for reasons imputed to great power competition. From the communist threat during the cold war, to terrorist menace during the last two decades and to the rivalry with China in recent years, US grand designs remained confined in the obsession of maintaining a hegemonic status, mainly by the use of military force and the search for foreign outlets and markets with imposed economic rules, regulation and even sanctions.

There may be time that the "American dream" with its aspects of a noble vision will be expanded beyond American boundaries. Conversely, there is a hope the ban imposed on migrants and refugees by Trump's administration will be removed by the new President, Joe Biden.