

Discussion Paper

Understanding The New US Strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa

Perspectives from the Horn of Africa

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March 2023

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The Institute for Strategic Insights and Research (ISIR) is an independent nonpartisan think tank dedicated to contributing to building democratic public institutions and pluralistic societies in the Horn of African countries.

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INTRODUCTION

The Sub-Saharan Africa region emerges as a strategic partner to the U.S. because of its growing influence on the world stage, the continent has diverse ecosystems, and is one of the most significant voting blocs; according to the U.N., Sub-Saharan Africa has a huge population that boosts enormous free trade areas.¹ It is estimated that Africa's population will be mostly urbanized and bigger than any other region in a decade. Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AFCFTA) can generate \$3.4 trillion in gross domestic product, pitting it among the five largest economies in the world.²

The new US strategy towards sub-Saharan Africa aims to strengthen its ties with the region and build on its past Obama-era engagements. In a speech made in Ghana in 2009, President Barack Obama said, "I see Africa as a fundamental partner to America."³ President Biden who was Vice President under Obama has also strengthened America's commitment to engage with Africa. However, the U.S.-Sub Saharan Africa relations slowed down under Trump and were reoriented towards countering China's influence in the region instead of putting forward African-centred proposals. Former President Trump's "prosper Africa " initiative was meant to bolster trade and investment with the continent to fend off Chinese and Russian influence termed as "predatory practices" according to then National Security Advisor Mr. John Bolton.

As the Biden Administration outlined its new strategy towards Sub-Saharan Africa, this policy brief puts into perspective the region's importance on issues of mutual benefit to both the U.S. and Sub-Saharan Africa.

These include maintaining global peace and security, jointly addressing new emerging issues such as the backsliding of democracy, improving U.S.-Africa trade relations, technology transfer in the digital transformation age, and enhancing "Preventive Diplomacy" to resolve Inter-State and Intrastate conflicts that continue to affect the African states.

For the first time since the cold war, African nations have had more options for trade, political, and investment partnerships. China has become Africa's biggest lender, while the EU, the US, and the UK have also increased their diplomatic and trade ties with Africa on more mutual-based terms. This strategy is essential as international competition is at an all-time high, with China's expansion, the Russia-Ukraine war, Brexit, and new emerging powers like Turkey, Brazil, India, and Gulf States all geared up to strengthen their trade and diplomatic ties with Africa.

What are the US Strategic objectives for Sub-Saharan Africa?

The new U.S. Strategy was rolled out by Secretary Blinken in August 2022. The strategy outlines America's planned development activities in four areas; security, democracy, prosperity, and economic development. These are also dubbed the "four pillars" of the current US strategy. Since then, there has been a sharp uptick in American diplomatic initiatives in Africa; in 10 months, US government officials visited Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Morocco, Algeria, South Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Rwanda.

¹The Whitehouse. (2022a, August 8). Fact sheet: U.S. strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/08/08/fact-sheet-u-s-strategy-toward-sub-saharan-africa/>

²Ibid

³The White House. (2012, June 14). Fact sheet: Obama administration accomplishments in Sub-Saharan Africa. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/06/14/fact-sheet-obama-administration-accomplishments-sub-saharan-africa>

This could be perceived as the US' efforts at building alliances in Africa that can help it boost its global standing whilst it advocates for plurality and "openness" as espoused by its current Africa - Engagement Strategy. It could also be translated as a geopolitical superpower rivalry in countering Russia and China's activities in Africa and harnessing Africa's political leverage in the global arena, at the U.N.

In his address to the African Union in 2021, Joe Biden, the current U.S. President emphasized the U.S. government's commitment to partnering with African countries for mutual benefit. Similarly, during the US-Africa leaders' summit in 2022, President Biden reiterated his administration's commitment to supporting "*every aspect of Africa's inclusive growth*" Between 2021 and 2022, President Biden deepened engagements with Africa, particularly through the development of a new strategy for a 21st Century U.S.-Sub-Saharan Africa partnership. This strategy aims to advance the U.S. interests in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The new U.S. strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa endeavours to partner with Africa in four key areas. The U.S. will engage with Africa in more informal ways to encourage more trade showing a good cause in improving living conditions in the region. In addition, the US strategy seeks to help amplify the role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in an effort to help strengthen democracy in Africa."

The second focus is on democracy and security dividends. The region is home to prolonged conflicts and political disagreements.

The U.S. has committed funds to help promote democratic governance and prevent autocratic regimes from dominating political space. This measure will affirm the U.S.' stand on the positive outcome of good governance and still give conflicting countries free choice in running their affairs⁴.

The third focus is on pandemic recovery and economic opportunity. Covid 19 and the Ukraine-Russia war increased Africa's supply chain problems. This is a timely intervention given that the region needs a robust health system to respond to future shocks and to rebuild its economy The U.S. government seeks to boost African countries' economic recovery, build capacity and preparedness for disease outbreaks, and support local manufacturers and supply of vaccines. Covid 19 and the Russia-Ukraine war have affected Africa's workforce, and the U.S. is keen to rebuild food systems to make the region work and food sufficient⁵.

The fourth pillar of focus for the US strategy on Sub-Saharan Africa is on Environment conservation, climate adaptation, and just energy transition. The U.S. will work closely with African governments and other local players to conserve and restore rich natural ecosystems. Conservation will reduce carbon emissions and reduce climate change effects. Biden's administration will fight wildlife trafficking. The U.S. government will empower countries championing climate and environment conservation. Some of the efforts that have been proffered towards the achievement of these goals include supporting democracy and supporting Africa to participate fully in the world economy.

⁴ The Whitehouse. (2022b). U.S. strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/U.S.-Strategy-Toward-Sub-Saharan-Africa-FINAL.pdf>

⁵ Ibid

Recently, this has also involved fighting terrorism at the country level, regionally as well as internationally.

Profiles of U.S. engagement with the Horn of Africa: Past Perspectives and Future Outlooks

Ethiopia:

Ethiopia has not conducted an official national census for more than a decade; however, the country is ranked as the second most populous country in Sub-Saharan Africa after Nigeria. While its economy has slowed down due to more than two years of internal civil strife resulting from the War in the Tigray region and heightened inter-ethnic tensions, the World Bank projects growth in the years to come. Addis Ababa is home to the African Union and hosts most of the diplomatic missions in the world and comes third after New York and Geneva⁶. The United States and Ethiopia first engaged diplomatically in 1903⁷. It's because of its significance in regional influence the U.S. has built and kept diplomatic connections with Ethiopia to promote regional peace and security. Despite having a diplomatic edge, Ethiopia grapples with internal challenges such as high levels of poverty. According to a World Bank study, Ethiopia ranks very low in terms of per capita income, with a gross national income of \$960⁸. Ethiopia receives over half a billion dollars in contributions from the U.S. government for humanitarian needs⁹. Over 720,000 refugees reside in Ethiopia, making it the third-largest refugee population in Africa. Moreover, the U.S. provided \$94.4 million to support the refugees to keep Ethiopia and the region stable.

Currently, Ethiopia aims to become a lower-middle-income country by the year 2025 and boasts growing trade opportunities, particularly in the manufacturing, agriculture, and energy sectors. For the U.S., Ethiopia presents various mutually beneficial opportunities for engagement. First, the U.S. can continue supporting Ethiopia in the efforts to improve human rights protection as well as strengthen its democratic institutions. The U.S. should also consider revoking its initial decision to withdraw privileges under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), hence encouraging economic growth and development. On its part, Ethiopia should strive to improve the business environment and ensure a level playing field for investors to inculcate a culture of entrepreneurship to realize its ambitions to achieve prosperity and positive economic growth.

Kenya:

Kenya is undoubtedly the economic powerhouse in the region, as well as a democratic success story. The U.S. established international relations with Kenya in Nairobi on March 2, 1964¹⁰ and still enjoys a continuous mutual-interest relationship in economic advancement and security. Evidence of the thriving diplomatic ties between these two nations was seen in 2018 when President Kenyatta and President Trump rubber-stamped a trade partnership by starting an annual bilateral strategic dialogue¹¹. Furthermore, the East African regional financial and transport hub and its proximity to countries such as Somalia make Kenya a valuable partner and ally, particularly regarding security and trade interests.

⁶One of the world's most important diplomatic hubs is restricting the movement of diplomats (2022) https://finance.yahoo.com/news/one-world-most-important-diplomatic-133810896.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xILmNvbS8&guce_referrer_

⁷U.S. Department of State. (2018b). U.S. Relations with Ethiopia. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-ethiopia/>

⁸The World Bank in Ethiopia (2022). <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/ethiopia/overview>

⁹U.S. Department of State. (2018b). *U.S. Relations with Ethiopia*. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-ethiopia/>

¹⁰Office of the Historian. (n.d.). *Kenya - Countries*. <https://history.state.gov/countries/kenya>

¹¹U.S. Department of State. (2018a). *U.S. relations with Kenya*. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-kenya/>

The U.S. has a strategic interest in Kenya's security and overall stability. It has partnered with the Kenya Defense Forces (KDF) in the fight against Al Shabaab¹². Besides the military support, the U.S. offers the Kenya defense forces access to unrivaled international military education and training (IMET) programs. The U.S. is also providing maritime patrol to Kenya and improving peacekeeping competence. These efforts focusing on security and defense assistance from the U.S. to Kenya form the major connection between the two nations.

In terms of trade, the U.S.-Kenya relationship is defined by increasing trade between the two nations. Generally, Kenya has a modestly diversified economy that has sustained a stable five percent growth in domestic products over the last decade. Such a stable economy has attracted many U.S. companies which have established regional bases in Kenya's capital, Nairobi. Besides being a significant tourist destination, Kenya is the largest economy in East and Central Africa; it thus serves as an entry point to other regions¹³. The economy makes the country an investment hub opportunity for U.S. companies seeking to expand to overseas destinations. The growing U.S. trade interest is evidenced by the growth of private U.S. companies in Kenya, ranging from technology, banking, consumer goods, and the health sector. Trade between Kenya and the U.S. has also significantly expanded in recent years. For example, most of Kenya's exports are to the U.S. since Kenya is a member of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which provides preferential trade benefits. The U.S. also forms one of the largest sources of imports to Kenya.

Besides, the United States has an existing trade framework with the East Africa Community of which Kenya is a member state.

Somalia:

Somalia has the longest coastline in Africa and untapped resources, including oil, gas, agricultural land, and geostrategic ports. World powers have in recent years increased their interest in Somalia's untapped resources. The U.S. - Somalia engagement has traditionally involved financial and military support to Somalia to strengthen the fight against militant groups, especially Al Qaida and their affiliate, Al Shabaab. However, the U.S. has, in recent years, demonstrated interest in renewing other forms of engagement with Somalia; for instance, it opened an Embassy in Mogadishu in 2018¹⁴. In addition, since 2006, the U.S. has provided Somalia with over \$3 billion in financial aid to address famine, drought, and refugee problems. The U.S. has also provided an additional \$253 million to support Somalia in growing its economy and political governance structure to provide its citizens with essential services.

Currently, the U.S. is equipping the Somali forces to fight the terrorists. The A.U. peace-keeping mission is gradually handing over the fight to the Somali forces, and the U.S. is helping the Somali government to be self-sufficient to defend itself¹⁵. Meanwhile, Somalia ranks as the most corrupt state, a situation that has prevailed for the last ten years, according to the latest report of the Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International¹⁶. Somalia also faces urgent humanitarian needs as a result of worsening drought conditions and high poverty rates as the number of people living below the poverty line reaches 69%¹⁷.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ U.S. Department of State. (n.d.). *U.S. Relations with Somalia*. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-somalia/#:~:text=U.S.%20foreign%20policy%20objectives%20in>

¹⁵ Integrated Country Strategy: Somalia. (2022). https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/ICS_AF_Somalia_Public.pdf

¹⁶ Corruption Perceptions Index (2022). <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022>

¹⁷ The World Bank in Somalia (2022). <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/somalia/overview>

Insecurity and internal displacement because of conflicts and prolonged droughts are also on a steady rise.

If Somalia is to fully reap the benefits of this renewed interest from the U.S., it would be prudent for the federal government to employ measures to strengthen the weak public institutions, to curb the deep-rooted and institutionalized corruption. Another key area where the Somali Government can benefit from the new U.S. strategy would be to shift away from indirect elections to one-person-one-vote elections. In an effort to achieve this goal, Somali leadership will have to ensure political will to overcome continued conflicts and security challenges.

Djibouti:

With a population of One Million and located in a strategic location, this tiny nation has become the gateway to the Horn of Africa through the Red Sea which makes it a major player in regional security, and economy. Through a formal agreement, Djibouti hosts the U.S. military camp, stationed at Lemonnier¹⁸. In addition, the U.S. has partnered with Djibouti and provides significant humanitarian aid. For instance, the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, which is an arm of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), keeps food reserves in a warehouse in Djibouti. The reserves are meant to offer a rapid humanitarian response when there are acute food shortages in Djibouti, Africa, and some Asian countries. Djibouti's economic growth recently slowed down, owing to the civil unrest and insecurity experienced in neighboring Ethiopia, coupled with the global supply chain disruptions created by the pandemic.

The country also faces the urgent risk of rising debts which are estimated to have reached 74 percent of its GDP in 2021, which makes the financing of its economic growth targets unsustainable.

Djibouti's president is the second longest-serving president after Isaias Afwerki of Ethiopia. President Guelleh came to power in 1999 and got re-elected for a record five terms after amending the constitution. While the US considers Djibouti as a close partner because of the significance of its geographic location, the primary objective of the US Strategy towards the Sub-Saharan is to "*Foster Openness Societies*". In response, Djibouti has to focus on expanding the civic space, embracing independent media, and holding credible elections in order to sustain its relations with the US.

Sudan:

The U.S. government has had shaky ties with Sudan since its independence in 1956. The US-SUDAN relations were often broken and re-established. In 1996 the U.S. linked Sudan with various terrorist groups, and the U.S. severed links with Sudan again until 2002¹⁹. According to the U.S. Department of State, human rights advancement in Sudan saw the U.S. remove Sudan from the "Countries of Particular Concern" list for International Religious Freedoms. Sudan was also removed from the list of states that sponsor terrorism in 2020. The U.S.-Sudan relations have greatly improved since then, with the U.S. providing more support towards Sudan's democracy.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of State. (2022a). *U.S. relations with Djibouti*. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-djibouti/#:~:text=Strategically%20located%20in%20the%20Horn>

¹⁹ U.S. Department of State. (2018c). *U.S. Relations with Sudan*. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-sudan/>

The political situation in Sudan began to unravel after protesters took to the streets to oppose decades old Al Bashir's regime in April 2019. The protests culminated in a military coup led by Lieutenant-General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, who, through military provisional administration, became chairman of Sudan's ruling Transitional Military Council. The civilian-led professional associations are largely credited for the ouster of Al Bashir through massive protests. They remained in the streets until the military leadership conceded to civilian demands through the forum known as Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), a large civic groups coalition, which led to the Constitutional Charter of 2019. The Charter was conceived before 1989 and is supported by most civil groups in the FFC. It commits to building "a modern, democratic nation-state".

Economy-wise, the country is experiencing deeper economic strains occasioned by the reversal of political gains and the fact that global lending institutions led by the IMF and World Bank reneged on their pledged support for Sudan's political transition. Sudan's agreement in 2021 with World Bank and IMF was about helping the country benefit from financial facilities and ending Sudan's isolation, and therefore any reversals (or non-compliance by the Sovereign Council) in the political sphere could see the country slide back into an economic abyss.

Due to decades of conflicts, the current U.S. Strategy for the Horn of Africa region seeks to promote democratic governance in Sudan. Despite the democratic strides made by Sudan, there is inherent divisiveness among civilian groups and with the military.

This will be a challenge in any engagements with the US. The future stability and peace of the country will hinge on inclusivity for all groups in all political processes in order to have a pathway to sound constitutional order in Sudan.

Somaliland:

Somaliland presents an example of the U.S.' renewed commitment to act in the Horn of Africa. As a breakaway state from Somalia, it is seeking to establish bilateral relations on its own and has approached various countries, including the United States. Somaliland's key strengths lie in its journey towards a democratic path. In 2021 Somaliland succeeded in holding joint parliamentary and local council elections. Somaliland is also praised for building economic infrastructure of its own and enjoys political independence from Somalia; however, no country recognizes Somaliland as an autonomous state.

Similarly, the U.S. has demonstrated its unwillingness to grant Somaliland full diplomatic recognition as an independent country. However, the U.S. Senate included Somaliland in the recently approved National Defence Authorization Act (NDAA) which essentially requires the U.S. Department of State to report to Congress on assistance proffered directly to Somaliland from the U.S. The NDAA also requires a report on the feasibility of possible collaboration between the U.S. and Somaliland on issues of human rights and security²⁰.

The inclusion of Somaliland in the NDAA act could be construed as the U.S.' acknowledgment of Somaliland as a separately functioning entity.

²⁰ Biden Signs NDAA Bill into Law (2022). <https://saxafimedia.com/biden-ndaa-bill-considering-cooperation-somaliland/>

One of the activities set to be performed following the signing of the NDAA into law is the U.S.-led multinational military training exercise, Justified Accord, scheduled for February 2023²¹. This will be followed by a feasibility study commissioned by the department of state, the findings of which will be presented to congress for possible future support. However, Somaliland's failure to control tensions in laascaanod which has drawn international criticism may have led to the removal of Somaliland from participating in the joint multi-national exercise.

One particular dimension that the US is interested in will be Somaliland's democratization process and its respect and adherence to human rights. While it is considered a significant step in the right direction for Somaliland, it might be an uphill task for Somaliland considering its tough stance on dissenting voices. According to the annual 'Review of Human Rights Centre' report for 2022 released by the Hargeisa-based Human Rights Centre, 278 people were arrested last year; 48 of these were journalists, 209 were peaceful protestors, and 21 were opposition party members. There are also delayed presidential elections as well as a lack of consensus amongst political stakeholders regarding the creation of a roadmap to resolve the impasse.

South Sudan:

seceded from Sudan and became a sovereign independent state on July 9, 2011. The United States has duly recognized South Sudan's independence since then. The U.S. was a crucial player in developing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005, which triggered the 2011 referendum calling for independence.

The referendum was supported by most people and led to the creation of the new country of South Sudan²².

The U.S. provides humanitarian aid for food, sanitation, and clean water plus essential services such as health and education to a large percentage of the South Sudanese population. Almost 8 million people face food insecurity in the country, making it one of the most food-insecure nations. Aid workers also live in danger in South Sudan, and the United States provides peacekeeping financial aid of more than \$1 billion to support the South Sudanese government²³. These activities are set to continue, according to the new U.S. Strategy for the Sub-Saharan Africa region.

Eritrea:

Eritrea is another state located along the Red Sea in the Horn of Africa region. It attained its independence from Ethiopia in 1993. Its current leader, Isaias Afwerki is the longest-serving president in the region and has been known to rule the country with a degree of dictatorship. For instance, he imposed maximum control of the country's national media and banned all manner of political opposition. Since its independence in 1993, Eritrea engaged in hostile conflict with its neighbors, the most notable conflicts being the border war with Ethiopia between 1998 and 2000, as well as the Dumeira dispute with Djibouti. For the better part of the last decade, Eritrea was isolated and remained on the sidelines, having been sanctioned by the UN Security Council. In 2009, Eritrea voluntarily withdrew itself from the IGAD.

²¹ U.S. HOA Joint Task Force set for Training Exercise in Somaliland. (2023) <https://www.horndiplomat.com/2023/01/14/us-hoa-joint-task-force-set-for-training-exercise-in-somaliland/>

²² U.S. Department of State. (2022b). *U.S. Relations with South Sudan* - <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-south-sudan/#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20Government%20is%20the>

²³ Ibid

In 2018, also known as the year of the Horn of Africa rapprochement, Eritrea signed a peace agreement with Ethiopia after Dr. Abiy Ahmed came to power. Dr. Abiy Ahmed agreed to uphold the border-demarcation agreement also known as the Algiers Accord. This was followed by the lifting of the UN Security Council sanctions on Eritrea, and in early 2023, Eritrea rejoined the IGAD regional body.

Since the country just re-established regional ties, its relations with the United States remain unclear, especially given its prevailing relations with the adversaries of the United States, particularly Russia, and China, which may also further antagonize the Americans. Eritrea will need to make radical changes to establish close ties with the United States. First, it needs to open the political space and engage on a transition journey to democratization.

Geopolitical Risks of China-US Rivalry in the Horn of Africa: Outcompete or Disengage?

In the last two decades, the U.S. government's support towards the Horn of Africa region revolved around fighting terrorism and violent extremism, overlooking economic development. This was part of its war on terror. The region is also known to be a hotspot amidst general insecurity, and internal civil strife, it has witnessed more interstate wars than any other region in the world. Most human-development-indicator indices rank the region very low. This is because of the fact that the regional states struggled to overcome civil strife, violent extremism, and climate change impact, among others.

These trends have necessitated the intervention of the world's superpowers, who have often engaged in proxy rivalries making the region a battleground for external players to assert their dominance. These competitions for dominance add more complexities to the region's efforts to overcome its challenges.

For instance, China has been a major investor in the region, seemingly competing with the US for recognition as a partner to African nations. The interest in developing links with the Horn of Africa region is because of its strategic location as a link to the Persian Gulf through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Beijing's flagship overseas economic agenda, which includes the Belt and Road Initiative, considers most of the seaports of Horn of Africa countries as entry points to the African hinterlands.

The governance, peace, and security challenges in the region may have further led to underdevelopment, as a result of stunted economic growth. In response, China initially stepped in and financed infrastructural developments across the Horn of Africa and has extended long-term loans to many countries in efforts to establish itself in the region. In Kenya, China has proffered financial support for the building of a new railway line, the Standard Gauge Railway line, while in Djibouti and Ethiopia, it has revamped the colonial-era Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway and highway.

This places China in a prominent position in economic conversations in the region, edging out more traditional development partners such as the US. Currently, 70% of Djibouti's external debt is owed to Chinese investors while that of Ethiopia is about \$14 billion²⁴.

²⁴ Ylönen, A.(2022). A scramble of external powers and local agency in the Horn of Africa. CIDOB.
https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionals/280/a_scramble_of_external_powers_and_local_agency_in_the_horn_of_africa

By responding to the demands of countries in the Horn of Africa region who need significant infrastructure development to meet their economic growth targets China has stamped its influence and the United States has taken note.

The U.S. Strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa is therefore coming to realize that its time to outcompete instead of confronting or decoupling China's role in Africa as defined by Secretary Blinken in a press conference at the state department in March 2022. Secretary Blinken was quoted as saying, "*in the next decade we will be investing in critical infrastructure and working with allies to bolster supply-chain security while preventing unintended crises*"²⁵. The US-African leaders summit in late 2022 evidenced America's commitment to renew and strengthen its relations with the continent of Africa where president Biden made remarks and referenced their interest in partnering with the African Union on its ambitious development Agenda 2063.

Possible Spillover from the Russia-Ukraine War

Russia and Ukraine are the biggest suppliers of wheat, and sunflower, globally while Russia alone is one of the leading exporters of crude oil²⁶. The Horn of Africa region and the African continent, in general, are affected by the rising food and energy prices owing to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Africa's high dependence on wheat from Russia and Ukraine makes it more vulnerable to external shocks as most countries in the continent are reliant on food imports.

Furthermore, the war has affected the supply chain of food and commodities coming from these countries²⁷.

Western countries have imposed sanctions on Russia, causing further constraints on commercial flows of commodities as vital port operations have been closed down. Russia is a big exporter of fertilizer, and since the war began, there has been an acute shortage of fertilizers, threatening agricultural production in the region. This shortage will drive the prices of food up. Russia is the third-largest oil producer in the world, and its disruption due to the war and sanctions will push fuel prices up; subsequently, food production will go high, and countries in the Horn of Africa might experience an upsurge in food insecurity²⁸.

Meanwhile Western countries may have taken note during the UN resolution to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine in march 2022 when a large block of African countries 17 in total abstained from voting in favor of the resolution and eight others including Ethiopia and Algeria avoided even participating in the UN vote. As African economies rely primarily on food imports, they can't afford both the western and eastern powers. It's therefore understandable that western countries acknowledge Africa's diplomatic relations with Russia or China in order to diversify its trading partners and political allies.

Russia plans to host African leaders in July 2023, following the first Africa-Russia summit in Sochi in 2019 when a joint declaration for political economy, and security cooperation was issued. Since then, the presence of Russia in Africa was evidenced by its interest in the Red Sea as well as in parts of Western Africa. This interest was also demonstrated by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov's visits to 12 African countries in January, just six months after his previous tour of Africa.

²⁵ <https://www.voanews.com/a/blinken-to-outline-us-strategy-to-outcompete-china-while-not-seeking-decoupling-/6590331.html>

²⁶ Al Jazeera. (2022). *Infographic: How much oil does Russia produce?* <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/5/infographic-how-much-oil-does-russia-produce>

²⁷ Sacko, J., & Mayaki, I. (2022, April 21). How the Russia-Ukraine conflict impacts Africa. Africa Renewal. <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/may-2022/how-russia-ukraine-conflict%C2%A0impacts-africa>

²⁸ Ibid

The visits marked Russia's assertive policies to court Sub-Saharan Africa through diplomatic efforts and incentivizing trade in order to circumvent sanctions coming from the west. The visits however may pose a risk and become faultlines for possible spillover of the Russia - Ukraine conflict into Sub-Saharan Africa.

Conclusions

The new US strategy towards Sub-Saharan Africa presents potential areas for strengthening relations with the region. For years, global powers were rather hesitant to put forward African-led agendas or involve Africa in development conversations. Despite certain Sub-Saharan African countries experiencing backsliding democracy i.e., army coups or amending constitutions to extend terms in office, Africa is also making strides toward democratic governance. In 2023 alone, more than 23 countries are expected to hold elections. The US joins an increasing list of major powers recognizing the region's growing influence on the world stage.

On the other hand, there are risks in that the Horn of Africa attracts interest from foreign players such as China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. The region is prone to conflicts and has recently witnessed renewed tensions i.e., along Rwanda - DRC border, the Sudan-Ethiopia border, and the Ethiopia-Egypt border, regarding the Gerd Dam. By maintaining close ties with African countries, these foreign players will help reduce interstate tensions and conflicts by way of employing "preventive democracy" through the utilization of its soft power influence.

There is also potential for the US to extract business opportunities and forge new partnerships with African countries. Sub-Saharan Africa also possesses a significant natural resource wealth, which is critical to produce new technologies. America is known to be a leading pioneer in the information technology sector hence its investment would boost Africa's agenda in digital transformation. This has made leading US technology companies seek to partner with African nations. Therefore, the two blocks have the chance to negotiate trade agreements leveraging the African Continental Free Trade Act (ACFTA) In addition, given that the African Growth Opportunity Act (AGOA) established under President Bill Clinton will expire in 2025, African countries should prudently negotiate for an extension of the act, and an expansion to include the 10 countries currently excluded from AGOA.

The new US strategy has highlighted the critical role that the African diaspora could play in fostering relations between the US and Africa. for instance, the current U.S. administration has demonstrated its willingness to support African governments to achieve this goal, through the signing of the executive order (EO) establishing the President's Council on African Diaspora, in alignment with the U.S. strategy for engaging Africa in innovation and entrepreneurship, and the promotion of employment for the African youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The following policy considerations are offered to improve the US- Sub-Saharan Africa relations.

- The United States should focus on supporting Sub-African countries to overcome insecurity challenges and contribute to peace-building efforts as part of the continent's ambitious agenda for 2063 known as "silencing the guns". while avoiding superpower rivalry resembling the cold war era.
- The US could invest significantly in promoting democratic governance but also empower regional blocks and multilateral bodies as well as Civil Society Organizations to stand firm against countries that violate democratic gains.
- Improve food security and respond to issues related to climate change. Both the U.S. and Sub-Saharan countries should take bold climate actions in overcoming the crisis which has impacted Africa more than anywhere else due to its economic vulnerability and security fragility.
- Sub-Saharan countries should focus on shifting from being recipients of continuous urgent humanitarian assistance and rather invest in building resilient economies and sustainable agriculture.
- African governments should work to increase avenues for Africans in the Diaspora to invest in their home countries.

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