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## REPRIORITIZING ENGAGEMENT IN AFRICA

*While Countering Russian and Chinese Influence*



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# REPRIORITIZING ENGAGEMENT IN AFRICA WHILE COUNTERING RUSSIAN AND CHINESE INFLUENCE

*Natalie Gonnella-Platts, Director, Global Policy, George W. Bush Institute*

Africa's potential is limitless, but America's focus on the continent has significantly declined over the past decade. This needs to change. And fast.

Home to the world's youngest and fastest-growing population, nearly 2.5 billion people will reside in Africa by 2050, most [under 30](#). Africans [will total over](#) 40% of the world's young people in the next five years. By midcentury, [nearly a quarter of the world's working age population](#) will call the continent home. When empowered, educated, engaged, and healthy, they can be an [unparalleled force](#) in accelerating progress for all. Unfortunately, destabilizing forces have swiftly stepped in, led by Russia and China. Their perseverance is paying off, often at the expense of human rights, good governance, and security.

Correcting course on past missteps, American leaders must urgently prioritize reengagement in Africa, especially in ways that empower youth populations and advance freedom and opportunity.

## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The Trump Administration must prioritize the African continent as a top foreign policy focus
- Congress should reauthorize the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) for five years
- Public and private sector institutions should prioritize collaboration with African-led organizations that are working to advance the meaningful participation of young people in democracy
- The Trump Administration should strengthen U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Africa, emphasizing both traditional security objectives and investments to improve the human condition in at-risk communities
- The U.S. government, technology firms, and global media organizations must do more to support African journalists and independent media outlets across the continent

Africa already accounts for [more than half](#) of the world's 20 fastest growing economies. Entrepreneurship and innovation are driving solutions, sustainability, and growth. And [with 65% of the world's arable land](#) and [just under a third](#) of the world's mineral reserves, Africa's global economic significance in the coming decades is undeniable.

But U.S. engagement in Africa is declining. Prior to President Joe Biden's 2024 trip to Angola and Cabo Verde, the last state visit by an American president to an African country – beyond a day for the 2022 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27) – was in 2015. And foreign assistance to Africa from G7 countries – including the United States – [is at a 50-year low](#).

Russia, China, and other adversarial actors have eagerly stepped in to fill the vacuum. From security and development to culture and governance, Moscow and Beijing have wasted little

time expanding regional influence and anti-Western sentiment, with adverse consequences for peace and prosperity everywhere.

The continent has experienced an unparalleled level of political and economic crisis in the last five years alone. Democratic backsliding and rising corruption and kleptocracy have undermined agency, well-being, and opportunity for many, with young Africans [especially affected](#). Around 60% of young people say corruption is the biggest barrier to the continent's progress, and a similar number are considering emigrating because of it, the 2024 [African Youth Survey](#) showed. Economic hardship, conflict, and intercommunal violence have had an equally staggering influence on migration, poverty, and instability. This includes [a wave of coup](#) attempts (some successful, some not) across the continent.

Not surprisingly, Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping have leveraged these challenges for the benefit of their respective regimes – and to America's detriment. Across Africa, the median approval rating for U.S. leadership dropped to 56% in 2023 from 60% in 2021, according to [Gallup](#). China outperformed the United States for the first time in 2023, at 58%. Even more concerning, median approval of Russian leadership rebounded to 42% after a drop to 34% in 2022 following Russia's unjust full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Amid high rates of unemployment and barriers to education and training, Russian and Chinese cultural investments are increasingly winning the hearts and minds of young Africans. [Language programs, cultural centers](#), international youth forums, and a growing array of educational partnerships and [scholarship](#) opportunities for vocational and [tertiary study](#) are expanding their presence across Africa.

Over 100,000 African students currently study in universities across Russia ([35,000+](#)) and China (81,000+), by some estimates, often supported by state-sponsored financial incentives. In comparison, [around 50,000](#) African students study in the United States – [a third](#) from Nigeria alone.

When it comes to access to information on the continent, disinformation, media investments, and propaganda campaigns are regularly deployed to manipulate narratives, undermining truth and encouraging distrust of Western influences.

Most concerning is mounting interference by these authoritarian influences on governance and security. Russia and China have empowered juntas, fellow autocrats, and other corrupt actors with financial, military, and diplomatic support. This includes Russian mercenaries like the Wagner Group and other Africa Corps affiliates. The two countries have also aimed to accelerate their relationships with dozens of governments and institutions across Africa via regular and highly publicized convenings like the Russia-Africa Summit and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation.

Intergovernmental cooperation via the BRICS partnership is increasingly touted by [Moscow](#) and Beijing as a counterbalance to U.S. and European influence on the world order. Ethiopia and Egypt officially debuted as BRICS members in 2024 – joining Brazil, Russia, Iran, China, and South Africa. Uganda and Nigeria have been invited to become “partner states.” These efforts have had notable implications for multilateral engagement ([like United Nations votes](#)).

At the same time, the Kremlin has relentlessly pursued establishing itself as the preferred security partner in many African countries, eagerly shopping Russia's brutal paramilitary services via the [newly reimagined Africa Corps](#). From [Sudan](#) to the [Sahel region](#), [Russian-enabled carnage](#) has been horrific, especially for women, children, and other vulnerable populations. Beijing has also set its sights on [security opportunities, signing deals](#) with dozens of African countries to train police and security forces, exporting alarming governance protocols that directly violate personal freedoms and human rights.

[Over 40 million](#) people have been forcibly displaced across Africa – a figure that has doubled since 2016. Twelve of the 15 African countries with the highest forced population displacements “have been targets of Russian interventions to undercut democracy,” the Africa Center for Strategic Studies [shows](#).

Russia has further exploited these realities by [aggressively targeting destitute and disenfranchised communities](#) as well as Africans working and studying in Russia for [military recruitment](#) and other [tactical support](#) for the war in Ukraine. Moscow promises visas, financial incentives, and even [Russian passports](#) – and threatens existing visas. Most of the “volunteers” are sent to the [front lines](#).

### *The Trump Administration must prioritize the African continent as a top foreign policy focus*

The United States should renew its commitment to Africa and push back against Russian and Chinese dominance by designating the continent as a foreign policy priority from the outset. Righting past mistakes, early actions should include high-level visits to the region by U.S. leaders (including the president), meaningful engagement with the African Union and other regional institutions, and the continuation of the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit. Of equal importance is a strong commitment to U.S. development programs and direct engagement with communities and advocates.

Existing platforms – like the Millenium Challenge Corporation, the Development Finance Corporation, Prosper Africa, and the Fulbright program – have improved the lives of millions of Africans across the continent by stewarding investment, creating opportunities, and enhancing access to services. Considering the dire challenges facing many African communities, these efforts should be expanded upon in ways that directly confront evolving barriers to opportunity for Africa’s young people.

The challenges are immense: Nearly 29 million Africans ages 15 to 35 are unemployed, according to the [World Data Lab](#). And Chinese loans – [more than \\$182 billion since 2000](#) – exacerbate [crippling debt burdens](#). While some of these loans have contributed to development and infrastructure projects, China’s predatory lending has also meant that around 900 million Africans live in nations that contribute more resources to interest payments than essential services like education and health, as a recent [New York Times](#) analysis shows. Yet Chinese lending continues [at its highest level since 2016](#).

### *Congress should reauthorize the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) for five years*

For over two decades, PEPFAR has stood as one of the greatest examples of bipartisan cooperation and impact. Rooted in transparency and protecting the inherent dignity of all, PEPFAR has bolstered security, well-being, and democratic values in Africa and beyond. To date, the program has saved an estimated 26 million lives, including 7.8 million babies who have been born HIV-free. Enabling longer, healthier lives, PEPFAR has had a direct impact on increasing life expectancy across African countries. And PEPFAR countries have [more favorable](#) perceptions of the United States.

Nothing else like PEPFAR exists. When an AIDS-free world is within sight, it’s a dereliction of duty to deviate from our commitment to eradicate one of the greatest public health threats in history.

### *Public and private sector institutions should prioritize collaboration with African-led organizations that are working to advance the meaningful participation of young people in democracy*

Most African [youth prefer a democratic future](#) for their countries. But accountability mechanisms and participatory governance remain out of reach for many communities. In stark juxtaposition, [most of the world’s oldest leaders](#) are also in Africa, though the median age on the continent is 19.

African-led initiatives on anti-corruption and accountability, leadership development, equity and inclusion, and independent media are vital to toppling these barriers. Examples include organizations like the [Sahel Institute](#) and [Bidila Africa](#), which are using innovative and localized outreach to connect, include, and inform. But visibility and access to resources are imperative to long-term impact.



Support is also important for capacity building and opportunities to share best practices, connecting African civil society leaders with global peers facing similar challenges. The State Department already has the infrastructure to do this. For example, the Mandela Fellowship and YSEALI Fellowship directly engage young leaders from Africa and Asia, respectively, but rarely together. Finding ways via public and private sector institutions to promote cross-regional collaboration is an often-overlooked way to steward solidarity, support, and innovation among changemakers with common adversaries and challenges.

### *The Trump Administration should strengthen U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Africa, emphasizing both traditional security objectives and investments to improve the human condition in at-risk communities*

Militant and extremist violence across the continent grew by 20% in 2023 and claimed the lives of 23,000 people, [according](#) to the African Center for Strategic Studies.

Unfortunately, U.S. counterterrorism efforts have been deeply affected by Russia's and China's growing security influence in the region. For example, after recent coups in Mali and Niger, both the U.S. and French militaries were expelled in favor of Russian-affiliated mercenaries. Amid this reality, the mandate of U.S. African Command (AFRICOM) and other security partnerships remains critical. The administration should ensure these efforts are properly resourced and continue to affirm a commitment to enabling African leadership and collaboration with allies.

Continued support for programs that directly empower at-risk communities is also imperative. Economic opportunity, the protection of personal freedoms, access to quality education, and holistic health investments all have a proven effect building resilience against extremism. As such, U.S. development initiatives serve as a key counterterrorism tool and their long-term sustainability should be prioritized.

### *The U.S. government, technology firms, and global media organizations must do more to support African journalists and independent media outlets across the continent*

Narratives matter, especially as Russia and China continue to prey on media and social influence as favored tools to sway public opinion.

Moscow increasingly uses disinformation and misinformation to stoke unrest, skepticism of the West, and threats to safety and well-being. For example, a [2024 effort](#) by Russian-backed influencers exacerbated distrust of lifesaving antimalarial initiatives. Never mind that malaria is a preventable disease that claims the life of a child in Africa [every minute](#).

Beijing's [significant investment](#) in media and digital technology across Africa has skewed the information environment in favor of pro-Chinese narratives. This includes [the largest share of media bureaus](#) in the region and the training and employment of thousands of African journalists by Chinese outlets.

State Department tools could be used more strategically to disrupt propaganda and disinformation campaigns. While prior efforts, like the Global Engagement Center, worked to expose Russian disinformation, there is a significant opportunity and need to do much more.

Additionally critical are media partnerships and private sector investments that directly elevate the reach and expand the capacity of African journalists and independent media outlets. Too often, resource challenges undermine journalists' and organizations' sustainability and reach. As Russia, China, and other nefarious actors seek to control and co-opt public perceptions, the work of these journalists is ever more imperative in documenting abuse and countering misinformation.

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Africa matters. And the rights and well-being of populations across the continent have a direct impact on peace and prosperity everywhere. Russia and China have taken note and shrewdly acted in their interests. It's time American policy priorities realign in response.





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*2943 SMU Boulevard | Dallas, Texas 75205*