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Opinion **Africa**

Why the US is re-engaging with Africa

China has built much of the continent's infrastructure while Russia has deployed mercenaries to prop up dictatorships

DAVID PILLING



Antony Blinken, US secretary of state, has made two tours of Africa, and launched a reset of relations in South Africa © Andrew Harnik/AFP/Getty Images

David Pilling YESTERDAY

Donald Trump thought it was full of “shitholes” and countries with names such as “Nambia”. Barack Obama, for all his eloquence and family ties to Kenya, was underwhelming when it came to defining a practical strategy towards Africa — a continent that always slipped behind other regions in the list of priorities.

You have to go back to George W Bush, particularly his principled stance in fighting the Aids epidemic, or Bill Clinton, with his Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, a preferential trade pact, for an American leader with a compelling offering.

If the US has been relatively low key, others have not. Since the turn of the century, China has moved from a bit-part player to the main investor and trading partner for many countries from Angola to Ethiopia. Much of the infrastructure that has sprung up across the continent has been built by Chinese companies.

Outside the extractive industries, American companies have been slower to see commercial opportunities than those from emerging nations such as Turkey and India. More recently, Russia has pursued a cut-price diplomacy, sending mercenaries to Mali and the Central African Republic to prop up dictatorships and shady companies.

President Joe Biden is now seeking to redress the balance. The reticence of African states to engage with the continent's economic revival is a major challenge. Biden's

states to vote with the west in condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine (26 refused to do so) may have sharpened his thinking. Diplomatic engagement has been stepped up. Washington will hold a US-Africa summit in December, the first in eight years. Biden has reversed a decision by the Trump administration to draw down US troops from [Somalia](#) and the Sahel, both regions of persistent terrorist threat.

Antony Blinken, secretary of state, has made two tours of the continent, the latest in August when he swept through the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda. In South Africa, he launched what was billed as a reset of relations.

As he said, the 54 countries that make up the continent play a more important role in world affairs than is widely recognised. By 2050, one in four people on Earth will be African. If a majority are flourishing, they will be a source of huge dynamism and ideas. If many are floundering, they will fuel the problems of uncontrolled migration and unstoppable deforestation.

A third of the minerals that will be needed for the transition to sustainable energy lie beneath African soil. African people — and not just their elites — must benefit from the potential windfall with more transformation of raw materials on the continent itself. In the Congo Basin rainforest, central African states host the world's second-largest lung. African capitals marshal a quarter of UN votes. A Nigerian heads the World Trade Organization and an Ethiopian leads the World Health Organisation.

The policy [paper](#) that underlies the new approach lays out broad strategic objectives. Washington will support open societies, democracies, recovery from the shock of the pandemic and a just energy transition (for which read: it won't oppose gas). Washington will work with its "African partners": a phrase intended to convey that it is listening, not hectoring.

The US offering is positioned in deliberate contrast to what it calls China's "narrow commercial and geopolitical interests" and the Russian view of Africa as a playground for private military companies.

What are African governments to make of this? Many were not impressed with US leadership during the pandemic, when the west gobbled up available vaccines and left Africans to fend for themselves. (Biden's support for [overriding intellectual property](#) on Covid vaccine technology was seen as an important exception). The US — with its contested elections and rolling back of liberties — has also somewhat lost the democratic high ground.

Chidi Odinkalu of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University

detects a cold war throwback. “The US has come to the conclusion that, if they don’t re-engage, they will be abandoning Africa to Russia and China.”

Still, Alex Vines, director of the Africa Programme at the UK think-tank Chatham House, sees an opportunity for the continent. “This is Africa’s moment,” he says of the multinational engagement. However shaky, the US with its deep well of wealth, innovation and democratic ideals is a partner worth courting, he says. If diplomacy is transactional, then the countries of Africa should get ready to deal.

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