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The United States-Africa Relations: From Superiority to Mutuality

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Abstract
The evolution of US-Africa relations has transitioned from a dynamic of superiority to one aiming for mutuality. Historically, interactions were characterised by a paternalistic approach, rooted in Western colonial legacies, Cold War strategic interests, and economic exploitation. US policies did not consider African states as strategic development partners. The US often viewed Africa primarily through the lenses of geopolitical interests, aid recipients, and a raw material hub, resulting in an asymmetrical power relationship. However, the rise of African agency, economic growth, and shifting global power dynamics have prompted a gradual paradigm shift towards more mutual engagement. In recent decades, there has been a growing recognition of Africa's significance in Washington beyond its traditional status. By using qualitative research methodology and explanatory design, with data drawn from secondary sources, and content analysed, the study shows that initiatives such as 'Power Africa' and 'Prosper Africa' reflect efforts to foster mutual partnerships rather than one-sided dominance. Additionally, Africa's partnerships with other global powers, particularly China, have underscored the need for the US to adopt a more respectful and collaborative approach to remain relevant on the resource-rich continent. Realism, postcolonialism, and constructivist theories provided well-rounded insights and analogies. The paper exposed reasons that fueled the US superiority mindset towards Africa and assessed the factors driving the current shift towards mutuality, but at the same time, identified some challenges that remain in cementing the mutuality. Therefore, the paper recommended strategies to deepen the growing mutuality in the US-Africa relations.

Keywords: Africa relations, foreign policy, mutuality, national interest

Introduction

The relationship between the United States (US) and Africa has evolved significantly over the years, transitioning from a predominantly paternalistic dynamic to one characterised by growing mutuality. This shift can be traced through various historical phases, reflecting changes in US foreign policy priorities and Africa's development trajectory. Historically, US-Africa interactions were marked by a hierarchy, where the US, driven by Cold War strategies and a post-colonial mindset, viewed African nations as strategic pawns rather than equal development partners. This approach was characterised by interventions focused on combating

communism, supporting authoritarian regimes that aligned with US interests, and promoting development models that often disregarded local contexts. Such policies perpetuated a sense of American superiority and fostered dependency rather than genuine partnership (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024). Though the US was a colonial power, it never did so in Africa. This played a crucial role in the development of US-Africa relations after World War II. Between 1800 and 1885, Western European nations such as France, Great Britain, Germany, Portugal, Belgium, and Spain made a competitive invasion into Africa. This scramble for Africa culminated in the establishment of 54 colonial entities. As a result, and as Dickson (2004, p. 147) points out, "European powers exercised dominance over the African continent by annexing and partitioning its territories, driven by a range of strategic, industrial, and commercial interests".

By the turn of the 20th century, only Ethiopia and Liberia remained independent African nations. About 90% of the continent had been colonised. What was remarkable about this period of African history was the non-involvement of the US (Cohen, 2020). Before World War II, the US showed little interest in dealing with the African continent due to colonialism. Washington had little or no impetus to interact with African states directly; instead, if there were challenges or issues of concern, the US would simply contact the colonial powers. Until this period, the US had very scant geostrategic interest in Africa (Galileo, 2024). In the Cold War and post-colonial era, US-Africa relations were largely defined by Cold War geopolitics, with the US viewing the continent through the lens of competition with the Soviet Union. In the struggle between these two powers, Africa was mainly the battlefield through which these two countries gained ideological superiority in the war. During this period, many African countries were regarded as strategic allies or proxies, with US policy emphasising support for regimes that aligned with American interests, often at the expense of promoting democracy and human rights. This era perpetuated a sense of superiority in US policy, with aid often tied to political influence rather than development goals (Hoffman, 2020; Moyo & Yeros, 2021; Williams, 2022).

Due to the US foreign policy's neglect to prioritise Africa in advancing its national interests, US-African relations did not significantly improve in the early post-Cold War era. Since then, US policy toward Africa has not developed positively. This has been influenced by a variety of factors, including perceptions that made home matters and other global concerns more important. Africa did not develop into a true ally of the US because it was viewed as a temporary tool to help the US achieve its national interest (Toghyani & Arabahmadi, 2020). However, the later years of the aftermath of the Cold War brought some pragmatic changes in US policy towards Africa. It appeared that Africa's significance suddenly dawned on Washington in the 2000s, and particularly from the Obama regime (Kandel, 2014). This marked the commencement of the gradual shift toward mutuality. However, aspects of paternalistic attitude lingered, with the continent frequently perceived as an aid recipient rather than a partner in addressing global concerns. During this period, the US showed appreciable interest in responding to crises such as the 1994 Rwandan genocide, promoting democracy, providing humanitarian aid, and that Nigeria must join the war against terrorism (Dickson, 2013, p. 208). The lopsided nature of transactions in favour of the US posed a significant danger to the partnership, transforming the enterprise into a zero-sum game. For example, the US requires its partners to achieve 'good governance practices' as a benchmark for development assistance, despite that governance failures were visible on both sides (Simuziya, 2021).

A significant transformation occurred during the Clinton administration, which emphasised partnership and trade, exemplified by the establishment of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) in 2000. This initiative aimed to integrate African economies into global markets by offering preferential access to U.S markets. However, the realignment towards a relationship of equals gained momentum more recently, with initiatives such as the Power Africa (2013) in Obama's regime, Prosper Africa (2018) by Trump, focusing on increasing bilateral trade and investment rather than merely providing aid, and the Africa Strategy (2021) by Joe Biden (Smith, 2021; US Department of State, 2021).

Several factors are responsible for the US policy U-turn in Africa. They include economic reasons such as Africa's growing population projected to hit 2.5 billion by 2050, representing more than a quarter of the world population by then (Najib, Mahmoudb, & Placht, 2024). Africa's wealth is not just in human capital, but also in renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, and hydropower. The continent contains 30% of the globe's mineral reserves, including 40% of the world's gold and up to 90% of the chromium and platinum (Najib et al., 2024). Africa produced about 1 billion tons or 5.5% of the world's minerals worth $406 billion in 2019

alone, with a possibility of $2 trillion investment in natural resources by 2036. Africa owns 65% of the world's arable land and 10% of its internal renewable freshwater source (Kigozi, 2022).

Furthermore, Africa's rapidly growing economies present significant trade and investment opportunities. The US seeks to diversify its economic relationships beyond traditional aid, emphasising trade and investment as pathways for development. By promoting mutual economic interests, the US hopes to foster sustainable growth in African economies while securing access to natural resources and markets (Gadzala, 2018). This lucrative economic profile becomes attractive and difficult for the US to ignore, as Washington intends to maintain its global hegemony. Other factors such as geopolitical rivalry, security concerns and Africa's rising agency have prompted the US policy swing in Africa.

Today, we witness a new US policy that recognises Africa as a significant geopolitical force. The Biden administration's strategies for Africa aim to collaborate with Africa's 54 states as "equal partners" in addressing global issues and achieving common goals. The policies focus on building openness, delivering democratic and security dividends, accelerating pandemic recovery and economic opportunities, and addressing climate adaptation and a just energy transition. Antony J. Blinken, US Secretary of State, said that "it's a strategy that reflects the region's complexity, its diversity, its agency; and one that focuses on what we will do with African nations and peoples, not for African nations and peoples" (Kigozi, 2022). The emerging US-Africa relations reflect a gradual but decisive movement from a paradigm of superiority to one of mutuality. While remnants of the old dynamics persist, there is now a clearer acknowledgement of the existence of a cooperative framework that prioritises African leadership in solving regional and global issues.

Theoretical Framework

The evolution of US-Africa relations can be analysed through various theoretical lenses, particularly those of realism, post-colonialism and constructivism. These theories provide deep insights into how power dynamics, historical legacies and ideational factors have shaped interactions between the US and African states. In transitioning from a superiority-based framework to one growing in mutuality, understanding these theoretical underpinnings will help explain past trends, current realities and anticipate future developments. The adoption of these theories became inevitable as no single theory can on its own sufficiently capture and explain the dynamics and complexities of the policy issues associated with US-Africa relations, as this study aims to expose the US's initial superiority posture and its ongoing policy somersault to mutuality in its relations with Africa. First and foremost, realism is an international relations theory that prioritises state sovereignty, national interests, and security over ideals, social reconstructions, and ethics. Realism is frequently linked to power politics. The theoretical underpinning of realism is firmly based on the assumption that states, often known as sovereign actors, are the dominant actors on the global stage.

Furthermore, realists such as Hobbes, Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Morgenthau think that the international order is fundamentally a never-ending struggle for power, notably political and economic power, among states as they all strive to maximise their national interests (Inokoba, 2017). The realist orientation, with its excessive emphasis on the role of state power, security and national interest in international relations, has been central to the US approach towards Africa for much of the 20th century. In this view, US-Africa relations were initially defined by a hierarchy that positioned the US as a dominant global power with strategic interests in Africa. Thus, the US viewed Africa through a lens of superiority, often prioritising its strategic interests over mutual partnerships (Smith & Ochieng, 2023). During the Cold War, for example, US policies towards Africa were often shaped by the need to counter Soviet

influence, leading to support for authoritarian regimes and proxy conflicts in several African nations (Schraeder, 1994). These power-driven policies underscored a superiority complex, where the US prioritised its geopolitical power interests over the development needs of African countries.

Secondly, the postcolonial theory, which emphasises the impact of colonial history on current power structures, offers another critical perspective on US-Africa relations. This approach highlights the enduring legacy of colonialism and how it influences contemporary attitudes of superiority in Western foreign policy. African nations, having emerged from the shackles of European colonialism, often faced US policies that perpetuated forms of neo-colonialism through economic dependence and political interference (Rodney, 1972). Postcolonial scholars like Homi Bhabha argued that the legacy of colonialism is evident in the continued economic disparities and development challenges that African nations face (Bhabha, 1994), with the US historically adopting a paternalistic approach that viewed Africa through a lens of charity and aid, rather than as equal partners.

Postcolonialism examines how societies, governments and peoples in the formerly colonised regions of the world experience international relations. The use of 'post' by postcolonial scholars by no means suggests that the effects of colonial rule are now gone. Rather, it highlights the impact that colonial and imperial histories still have in shaping a colonial way of thinking about the world and how Western forms of knowledge and power marginalise the non-Western world. It is concerned with the disparities in global power and wealth accumulation and why some states and groups exercise so much power over others (Nair, 2017). Postcolonialists, by examining the lasting impact of colonialism on societies, emphasise the persistence of power imbalances between the global North (including the US) and the global South (such as African nations). They focus on how colonial legacies continue to shape international relations through economic, cultural, and political practices. A key theme of postcolonialism is that Western perceptions of the non-West are a result of the legacies of European colonisation and imperialism (Nair, 2017).

Postcolonialism, as a theoretical framework, provides valuable insights into US-Africa relations by analysing the lingering effects of colonialism on the political, economic, and cultural interactions between these regions. In postcolonial theory, the historical context of colonisation continues to shape contemporary power dynamics, even after formal independence has been achieved. US-Africa relations can be seen as operating within this framework, where the legacy of European colonisation and the enduring structures of global inequality continue to influence the dynamics between the US and Africa. For instance, US foreign policy toward Africa often involves a mix of economic assistance, military aid, and political influence, which can be interpreted as a continuation of hegemonic practices established during the colonial era (Mudimbe, 2023).

Thirdly, constructivism as a theory with heavy emphasis on the role of social constructions, such as identities, norms, and values in shaping state behaviour and international outcomes, aptly explains the US-Africa current behaviour. Constructivism emerged as a significant international relations theory in the late 20th century, challenging the dominant paradigms of realism and liberalism. Unlike realism, which emphasises the role of power and anarchy, and liberalism, which highlights institutions and cooperation, constructivism argues that the international system is socially constructed, meaning that its structures are not just shaped by material forces but also by ideas, beliefs, and identities (Wendt, 1999).

The Constructivism foundation posits that the key aspects of international politics are not objectively given but are instead constructed through social interaction. Alexander Wendt, one of the leading figures in constructivist thought, famously stated that "anarchy is what states make of it," indicating that the meaning and implications of anarchy in the international system

are not fixed but are shaped by the practices and perceptions of states (Wendt, 1992). In this view, state behaviour is not solely determined by the material structure of the international system, such as military power or economic capabilities, but also by the social context in which states interact.

Historically, US engagement in Africa was characterised by a paternalistic approach, often framed by a narrative of superiority. This was evident during the Cold War, when US policies were often driven by strategic interests and the desire to counter Soviet influence, frequently disregarding local contexts and needs (Khan, 2016). The promotion of democracy and human rights was sometimes more about geopolitical interests than genuine partnership, leading to scepticism from African nations regarding US intentions (Nye, 2017). These trends have greatly changed in line with constructivists' postulations that state identities are shaped through social interactions and that these identities and norms influence interests and policies. The recent US policy shift reflects an evolving identity that acknowledges Africa as a partner rather than a subordinate (Bader, 2021; Smith, 2024). As the US increasingly identifies Africa as a key partner in addressing global challenges, this evolving identity has shaped a more collaborative framework with the Biden administration's emphasis on "shared prosperity" and "mutual respect", marking a climax so far (Biden, 2021).

The US-Africa relations have acted out the tenets of the three theories adopted. Realism revealed the power-driven dimensions of the relations; the postcolonial perspective exposed the historical and colonial impacts of it, while constructivism provided the lens for understanding the ongoing transformation towards a partnership based on equality and shared interests. However, achieving true mutuality will require addressing structural inequalities and overcoming residual neo-colonial attitudes that continue to influence policy frameworks.

Statement of the Problem

The historical context of US-Africa relations has often been characterised by a dynamic of superiority, where US policies and engagements have prioritised American interests over genuine collaboration with African nations. This has resulted in imbalanced power dynamics, limited economic opportunities, and a lack of mutual respect in diplomatic relations. The challenge lies in transforming this paradigm towards a more equitable and mutually beneficial relationship that acknowledges Africa's agency and fosters sustainable development. This requires an examination of existing policies, factors that fostered the superiority mindset as well as reasons for the dramatic policy swing to mutuality on the part of the US The burden of this paper is to demonstrate the existence of a superior mindset on the part of the US in its earlier dealings with Africa; and how and why there is currently a new policy narrative in favour of mutuality.

Research Objectives

The following objectives aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of the transformation in US-Africa relations, highlighting the journey from a relationship marked by asymmetry to one striving for equality:

1. To examine historical dynamics by investigating the evolution of US-Africa relations, tracing the US shift from a superiority-based approach marked by lukewarm attitudes and scant allocation of resources to a more contemporary framework of mutuality.
2. To analyse and understand the underlying factors that contributed to both the US's prolonged diplomatic disinterest and superiority stance towards Africa.
3. To analyse the policy shifts by exploring key factors that enforced the US policy summersault in Africa from superiority strategies to mutual collaborations.

4. To evaluate the contemporary challenges in achieving a consolidated mutuality in US-Africa relations, such issues as power asymmetry, economic disparities, amongst others.
5. To provide strategic recommendations for policymakers on both sides to foster and consolidate the mutually beneficial relationship, emphasising genuinely fair trade relations amongst others.

Research Questions

To tackle the objectives of this study, the following research questions are pertinent:

1. What does history hold for US-Africa relations, especially as regards the former's paternalistic outlook?
2. Why did the US maintain a diplomatic cool feet and superiority posture towards Africa for so long?
3. What are the factors driving the transition from a perception of superiority to mutuality in US-Africa relations in recent decades?
4. What are the challenges remaining to cement this paradigm shift to mutuality in the US-Africa relations?
5. How would both the US and Africa foster and consolidate this move to mutuality in this new phase of their relationship?

Research Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative research methodology and explanatory style. The study by its nature is a qualitative research as issues discussed do not require figurative expression or numerical involvement. We also adopted an explanatory design because, under the topic, we can only explain and analyse policy issues. The use of the qualitative research methodology necessitated extensive and comprehensive collection and interpretation of secondary materials such as textbooks, academic journals, official documents, magazines, newspapers and internet resources. Content analysis was employed to analyse the data collected. This enables the work to showcase the dynamics of US foreign policy towards Africa from the early years of disinterest that culminated in the superiority mindset to the growing mutuality in recent decades.

Historical Overview of US-Africa Relations

The historical relationship between the US and Africa has evolved through distinct phases characterised by shifting power dynamics, political and economic interests. This transformation reflects a complex interplay of historical legacies and contemporary aspirations, moving from a paradigm of superiority to one of mutuality. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, European colonialism profoundly shaped the African continent. The US largely remained an observer during this period, influenced by its expansionist policies and Manifest Destiny ethos (Patterson, 2018). As mentioned earlier, the Western European nations made a significant march into Africa between 1800 and 1885, establishing 54 colonial territories in what was called the Scramble for Africa. At the turn of the 20th century, only Ethiopia and Liberia survived as independent African countries, but the US was not involved in this historic event (Cohen, 2020).

As a result of colonialism, before World War II, the United States had little or no interest in engaging the African continent. Washington lacked the audacity to speak with the African countries directly; instead, US leadership would simply contact the colonial powers in the event of a problem or other particular interests. As a result, the US was not only neutral but developed a lukewarm attitude toward Africa (Galileo, 2024). However, the post-colonial mid-20th

century marked a significant turning point. As African nations gained independence, the US sought to establish itself as a leader in promoting democracy and capitalism, often positioning itself in opposition to Soviet influence during the Cold War (Moyo, 2021).

During the Cold War, US foreign policy in Africa was often driven by geopolitical considerations rather than genuine partnerships. The US supported various regimes that aligned with its anti-communist agenda, regardless of their human rights records or governance practices, which it avowed to promote. This support often resulted in conflicts and long-term instability in several African nations (Adejumobi, 2020). The legacy of these interventions has left a lasting impact on US-Africa relations, fostering a sense of mistrust among African leaders and populations toward Western intentions (Osei, 2020). This period witnessed the unleashing of superiority policies towards Africa from President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1953 to the George H. W. Bush regime in 1991, when the Cold War ended (Schraeder, 1994). Policies such as containment and counter Soviet influence, democracy and human rights promotion, aid and humanitarian assistance, and resource extraction, neglected African sovereignty and agency; thus, they were considered paternalistic with no intention for local initiatives and development (Schraeder, 1994).

The end of the Cold War in the early 1990s prompted a reassessment of US strategies in Africa, even though Cold War legacies were still fresh, policies showed significant interest in economic reforms and resolution of regional conflicts with support for civil society and democratic governance (Schraeder, 1994). However, President Bill Clinton, who engaged a shuttle diplomacy in Africa, established the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) in 2000 to boost trade and investment rather than aid, while promoting democracy. This initiative signalled the gradual shift towards mutuality (Kamara, 2021). However, this shift was often seen as insufficient, as many African nations continued to experience economic challenges and political instability. The 21st century has seen further developments in US-Africa relations, marked by a growing recognition of Africa's emerging economic potential. The rise of China as a major player in Africa has also catalysed a sense of urgency in US policy, pushing for more substantial engagement based on mutual interests rather than a unilateral approach (Kavuma, 2022). US officials are increasingly acknowledging the importance of African perspectives in crafting policies that affect the continent (Biney, 2020).

Lately, the discourse around US-Africa relations is increasingly framed in terms of mutuality. The US aim to establish partnerships that respect African sovereignty and address shared challenges, such as climate change, health crises, and economic development (Moyo, 2021). This shift is evident in recent US policies that emphasise collaboration with African nations, promoting trade agreements, investment opportunities, and capacity-building initiatives. Barack Obama emphasised partnership and empowerment during his administration. Initiatives like the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) (2010), Power Africa (2013), and the first-ever US-Africa Leaders' Summit (2014) were designed to foster sustainable development and promote African leadership, moving away from traditional aid models (US Department of State, 2016). These programs reflected a commitment to collaboration and shared goals.

President Trump continued this trend with the launch of the Prosper Africa initiative in 2018, which aimed to increase trade and investment, highlighting economic partnership over aid (US Department of State, 2018). His administration also emphasised the importance of private sector engagement in Africa through the BUILD Act, promoting US investments that aligned with African development needs (US International Development Finance Corporation, 2018). President Biden's administration further solidified this shift with the Africa Strategy (2021), and the second US-Africa Leaders' Summit (2022), which emphasises a partnership approach that focuses on shared values and mutual benefits, prioritizing mutual interests on

climate change, health, and economic growth (US Department of State, 2021; US Department of State, 2022). Biden's approach emphasised even more collaboration and respect for African agency, reflecting a commitment to equitable partnerships (Schneidman, 2021). Biden administration's Africa policies insist on working with the 54 African nations as "equal partners" in tackling global challenges to achieve shared goals (Kigozi, 2022).

While this emerging mutual posture of the US-Africa relations is quite historic and laudable, significant challenges remain. Economic disparities, historical grievances, and differing political priorities still influence the relationship. The US must navigate these complexities to build genuine partnerships based on trust and equity (Besharov, 2019). In all, the historical perspective of US-Africa relations reveals a trajectory from a position of superiority to one of potential mutuality. While the past is marked by colonial legacies and Cold War interventions that have shaped perceptions of superiority, the present and the future offer opportunities for equitable partnerships grounded in shared interests.

Results and Discussion

The US initial diplomatic disinterest in engaging Africa can be attributed to a combination of historical, geopolitical, cultural, and economic factors. This lukewarm attitude persisted throughout much of the 19th and 20th centuries and helped shape the US superiority policy towards the continent. The US-Africa relations were given official recognition by former President Eisenhower, but US policy towards Africa was usually an afterthought. From the periods of the slave trade, colonialism, the Cold War and up till very recently, US dealings with Africa have been steered by its national and strategic interests. Until 1958, African affairs were given little prominence. However, under President Eisenhower, who authorised the creation of a Bureau of African Affairs in the Department of State, showed some concern; even though successive US administrations often blamed each other for paying too little attention to the needs of Africa (Institute for Democratic Governance, 2014).

The US was still a young nation at the time European colonial powers were establishing their dominance in Africa. The US, at independence in 1776, focused on European affairs and the domestic issues of slavery and westward expansion, leading to a lack of attention towards Africa. Early US foreign policy was therefore largely Eurocentric, prioritising relations with European nations while neglecting Africa. This historical context created a perception of Africa as an "other", a place not directly relevant to US interests (Mamdani, 2023). Although the US was later a colonial power, but not in Africa. This also created a significant diplomatic gap between the US and Africa in the post–World War II relations. Western European nations made a conquest into Africa in the 19th century during the Scramble for Africa (Cohen, 2020).

Unfortunately, the US was not part of this scramble. This limited the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between the US and African nations during the latter's initial decades of independence in the 20th century. This limited diplomatic outreach portrayed Africa as less important, thereby contributing to the lukewarm attitude of the US towards the continent (Klein, 2023); as Africa was seen as a European responsibility due to its enduring relations with its former colonial rulers of Europe (Institute for Democratic Governance, 2014).

Economically, the US was initially more focused on establishing its industrial base and dealing with domestic challenges. The lack of immediate economic interests in Africa, particularly in comparison to regions like Europe and Asia, contributed to its lukewarm attitude. The US did not see Africa as a viable market or a source of significant resources until the late 20th century, particularly with the discovery of oil and minerals (Baffour, 2023). Secondly, the "trade follows the flag"; a colonial policy by most colonial powers conditioning their colonies to consider them as preferred trade partners, hindering trade relations between the US and African nations during the colonial era and the immediate afterwards (Nguyen, 2023).

The East-West political factors have historically influenced presidential attention to African issues. According to this school of thought, US policymakers tended to view Africa from an East-West perspective. During the Cold War, US foreign policy was predominantly influenced by the need to counter Soviet influence rather than a proactive engagement with African states. The US often supported authoritarian regimes that aligned with its anti-communist agenda, overlooking the broader needs and aspirations of African countries. This reactive approach further entrenched a lack of genuine interest in Africa, as US engagement was primarily strategic and not grounded in a commitment to development or partnerships (Institute for Democratic Governance, 2014).

Throughout the 19th century, the US adopted a policy of isolationism, focusing primarily on its continental expansion and domestic issues. The Monroe Doctrine (1823) emphasised the Western Hemisphere's importance while largely ignoring Africa. This isolationist stance meant that the US was more concerned with European affairs and Latin America, considering Africa peripheral to its strategic interests (Eisenhower, 2023). The lack of African agency significantly influenced the tepid approach of the US in engaging the continent. This phenomenon, with its many implications, has often portrayed African states as passive actors in international affairs, lacking the capacity or leverage to assert their interests effectively. The concept of agency refers to the ability of a state to act independently and make its own choices on the global stage (Barkin, 2010). For Africa, the lack of agency has portrayed the continent as a recipient of aid or an area of strategic interest for external powers rather than an active partner capable of shaping the terms of engagement.

Historically, the legacy of colonialism deeply affected African agency. Colonial powers drew arbitrary borders, prioritised resource extraction over development, and created political systems that fostered dependency. This history has left many African states with weak governance structures, economies heavily reliant on raw materials, and a lack of integration into global trade networks. Consequently, Africa has often been perceived as lacking the capacity to assert itself in international politics, which has influenced the United States' unenthusiastic approach towards the continent, viewing it as a aid needing second fiddle (Mohan & Lampert, 2013). The US has maintained a superior policy approach towards Africa for several decades, ranging from after WW2 in 1947 to the end of the Cold War in 1991. These superiority policies, sometimes referred to as paternalistic policies, were driven by several interrelated and complex forces that influenced their release on Africa before the recent shift towards mutuality. These forces encompassed historical legacies, economic interests, security concerns, and geopolitical dynamics. Understanding these forces is crucial for analysing current US-Africa relations.

The legacies of colonialism and subsequent neo-colonial dynamics have profoundly influenced US policies toward Africa. Historically, many African nations were subjected to colonial rule, which fostered a perception of Western superiority that persists even today. This colonial past has created a paternalistic attitude in Western countries, including the US, which often views Africa through a lens of charity and intervention rather than partnership (Kendall, 2020). The ramifications of colonialism, such as economic dependency and political instability, have shaped the US approach, reinforcing a narrative of superiority and a belief in the need for Western intervention. This paternalistic mindset has often resulted in policies that prioritise American interests over genuine African needs, reflecting a continuation of colonial attitudes. The narrative of "saving or aiding Africa" has often been used to justify interventions, reinforcing the perception of US superiority (Mamdani, 2021).

Again, economic motivations are central to the US policy framework in Africa. The continent is rich in natural resources, including oil, minerals, and other resources vital for the US economy. This reliance on African resources has led to a focus on securing favourable trade

agreements and investment opportunities, often benefiting US corporations disproportionately (Taylor, 2017). For instance, initiatives like the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) provide preferential trade terms, but they often come with conditions that serve US corporate interests rather than fostering genuine economic growth in Africa (Sweeney, 2019). This focus on extraction, exploitation and profit underscores a colonial mindset, perpetuating economic inequalities.

The issue of security concerns has been a significant factor in shaping US superiority policy towards Africa. During the Cold War, the US major focus on Africa was the containment of Soviet and communist expansion. Africa's interests were not considered in policy formulation and implementation. Thus, US policies at the time were mostly paternalistic in approach. The rise of terrorism in the post-9/11 world and regional conflicts, particularly in areas like the Sahel and East Africa, led the US to prioritise the deployment of military forces on the continent (Hoffman, 2018). Initiatives such as US Africa Command (AFRICOM) reflect a security-centric approach. The emphasis on military solutions often overshadows diplomatic and developmental efforts, framing US involvement as essential for maintaining stability, thus reinforcing a narrative of superiority.

Furthermore, cultural imperialism and ideological beliefs have also shaped the US superiority mindset towards Africa. US foreign policy often embodies a belief in the superiority of American democratic and capitalist values, leading to interventions that seek to impose these ideals on African nations (Patterson, 2022). This ideological stance often overlooks the complexities of local cultures and governance structures, resulting in policies that are misaligned with the realities of African societies. The promotion of democracy and other ideologies, while valuable, amounts to disregard of local governance contexts and structures, perpetuating a dynamic of superiority.

The US policy summersault in Africa from a stance of superiority to one of growing mutuality represents a paradigm shift in US-Africa relations. Historically, US foreign policy towards Africa has evolved from a hierarchical approach to a more partnership-oriented framework. Recently, the Biden administration's policies for Africa seek to work with Africa's 54 nations as "equal partners" in tackling global problems and achieving shared objectives (Kigozi, 2022). Certain key factors have driven this multifaceted development, including changing global dynamics, economic, social, and diplomatic considerations, evolving African agency, and shifting domestic US interests. Understanding this shift requires examining each of these elements and their interplay.

Over the past several decades, the global distribution of power has undergone a substantial transformation. As Dickson (2019, p. 169) observes, the foremost feature of the immediate post-Cold War world was the dominance of the United States, and the transformation into a 'unipolar' system of hegemony, where the US had the physical resources to pursue its unilateralist foreign policy around the world. However, the ascent of emerging economies and the reconfiguration of geopolitical alignments have increasingly challenged this unipolar hegemony. After the Cold War, the US foreign policy towards Africa primarily focused on humanitarian aid and security concerns, such as counter-terrorism. However, in recent years, China's expanding influence in Africa has forced the US to reconsider its stance. China's Belt and Road Initiative, substantial investments, and development financing in Africa have garnered significant African support, creating competition for US interests (Hirono, 2019). China is gradually edging the US out of Africa in both political and economic spheres. China has also become one of the continent's biggest donors. China's no-strings-attached aid, in sharp contrast to US aid that demands labour standards, democracy, and human rights conditions, has helped it build goodwill across the continent (Viswanathan & Purushothaman, 2014).

Consequently, the US has had to adopt a more collaborative approach, recognising the importance of mutual partnerships over hegemonic relationships.

The US did not see Africa as a viable market or a source of significant resources until the late 20th century, particularly with the discovery of oil and minerals (Baffour, 2023). The economic landscape of Africa has become increasingly significant due to the continent's natural resources, growing population projected to hit 2.5 billion by 2050, and economic potential (Najib et al., 2024). The US has recognised that competition for these resources, particularly with China, requires a more strategic and cooperative approach to maintain access and influence. As China's trade with Africa has significantly outpaced US-Africa trade, the US has adjusted its strategy to foster more bilateral trade agreements and investment opportunities that emphasise reciprocity and mutual benefit (Wissenbach & Wang, 2017). Consequently, the US has increasingly focused on fostering trade rather than aid. Initiatives such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), Power Africa, Prosper Africa, and others highlight a shift towards promoting economic growth and market access. This approach indicates a recognition that sustainable development in Africa can better serve US interests through economic partnerships rather than through traditional aid and conditionality-based policies. (Wissenbach & Wang, 2017).

As earlier stated, the concept of agency refers to the ability of a state or group of states to act independently and make their own choices on the global stage. For Africa, the lack of this agency status has resulted in the continent's states being seen more as pawns to other "superior" states. However, in recent decades, African countries have become more assertive and strategic in their foreign policy. The continent's leaders have shown greater agency in international relations, including establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to boost intra-African trade and presenting a unified voice on key global issues. This growing assertiveness has forced the US to adopt a more collaborative approach that acknowledges the interests and priorities of African countries (Alden & Schoeman, 2013). African states under the auspices of the African Union have increasingly sought partnerships based on mutual respect and benefit rather than dependency or exploitation. As such, the US had to recalibrate its policy to align with these expectations and avoid being sidelined in favour of other global competitors willing to meet African countries on equal terms (Mokhater, 2020).

Security concerns have also played a role in adjusting US policy in Africa. Initially, the US security interests in Africa were largely limited to countering the Soviet Union during the Cold War and counter-terrorism efforts after the Cold War, especially in regions affected by extremist groups. However, there has been a recognition that sustainable security cannot be achieved through unilateral military operations alone. Addressing the root causes of instability, such as poverty, weak governance, and lack of economic opportunities, has become central to the US approach. This has required a shift towards mutuality, with the US supporting African-led security initiatives and peacekeeping missions such as AMISOM, which reflects a more partnership-based model (Boutellis & Williams, 2013). Furthermore, with the UN's promotion of the principle of subsidiarity in international relations, the US is increasingly constrained to unilaterally intervene in African affairs without first allowing the African Union to take the lead (Khan, 2014).

The transformation of US policy towards Africa from superiority to mutuality is a response to complex global changes. As Africa's geopolitical importance grows, the US has recognised the need for a collaborative approach that respects African agency and prioritises mutual benefits. This shift is essential for fostering sustainable partnerships that can address both US interests and the aspirations of African nations. With China's "no strings" attached policies, and the US' swift glide to mutuality, Africa appears to be gradually bidding farewell to the era of condition-based paternalistic policies if this trend is sustained. However, there are a few

obstacles to this policy transition. Appreciable progress has been made by the US to consciously move away from its traditional superiority stance in dealing with Africa. However, to achieve full mutuality is a complex challenge that encompasses various economic, political, and social dimensions. Below are some challenges that may gravely impede the process of realising full mutuality. The disparity in power between the US and African nations often creates a lopsided dynamic in relations. The US exerts significant influence through its military might, economic and political clout, which can overshadow African voices. This power imbalance complicates efforts for mutuality, as African countries may feel pressured to align with US interests rather than advocate for theirs (Osei, 2020).

Moreover, economic relationships between the US and Africa are frequently characterised by imbalances. US companies often extract resources from African countries without offering equitable compensation or development opportunities for local economies. The US economy is diversified, while many African economies are heavily reliant on exporting raw materials. This disparity or structural economic inequality makes it difficult to establish equitable economic partnerships (Khan, 2019). Similarly, the historical legacies of colonialism and Cold War interventions contribute to a lingering mistrust between African nations and the US. Many African leaders view Western involvement as a form of neocolonialism, complicating efforts to build equitable partnerships. This historical context influences contemporary perceptions and engagements (Patterson, 2018). In this light, the US itself many times sees Africa first as a responsibility of Europe due to the colonial relationship (Schraeder, 1994).

In a related development, political instability and governance challenges in several African nations can hinder meaningful partnerships with the US. While the US often emphasises the importance of democracy, good governance and human rights, some African governments perceive this focus as intrusive or paternalistic. This tension can undermine efforts for collaboration (Adejumobi, 2020). This is evident in Africa's preference for China, which does not place such criteria in its engagement. Despite shifts towards economic mutuality, some US foreign aid programs continue to carry elements of paternalism. The rhetoric of "helping" Africa can still overshadow genuine efforts towards partnership, reinforcing the perception of a superiority complex. US-Africa relations continue to involve massive aid and humanitarianism, while this may be good, it can create dependency that may stifle local initiatives and economic development. Transitioning from an aid-based approach to one focused on trade and investment is necessary in fostering total mutuality (Besharov, 2019).

Conclusion

The evolution of US-Africa relations from a framework of superiority to one of mutuality represents a paradigm shift and critical transition in international relations, shaped by historical legacies, economic interdependence, and shifting geopolitical dynamics. Historically, US engagement with Africa has often been characterised by a paternalistic approach, where American interests predominated, and African voices were marginalised (Osei, 2020). This dynamic has roots in colonial legacies and Cold War interventions, which have fostered mistrust and scepticism towards Western involvement on the continent (Patterson, 2018). As the global landscape evolves, there is an increasing recognition of the need for a more equitable and mutually beneficial relationship. The rise of other global powers, particularly China, has prompted the US to recalibrate its strategies in Africa, pushing for greater collaboration rather than competition (Kavuma, 2022). This shift is critical as it seems to have signalled the beginning of the end of the reign of conditional policies towards Africa, especially as African states continue to assert their agency and prioritise their development needs, seeking partnerships that respect their sovereignty and address their unique challenges.

Achieving mutuality in US-Africa relations requires addressing significant challenges, such as power asymmetry, economic disparities, and the lingering impacts of historical injustices. The good news is that the US is already shifting beyond aid dependency and adopting a trade-oriented approach that will empower African economies. Furthermore, fostering collaborations that include African perspectives in policymaking is essential for building trust and ensuring that initiatives align with local needs (Kamara, 2021). Ultimately, the pathway to mutuality is not just about rebalancing power dynamics but also about fostering genuine partnerships that promote shared values, mutual respect, and sustainable development. As both regions navigate the complexities of a changing world, a commitment to understanding and addressing the unique needs and aspirations of African nations will be pivotal in shaping a future of equitable relations (Moyo, 2021). By embracing this transformative approach, US-Africa relations could evolve into a model of collaboration that benefits both parties and reflects the interconnected nature of the global community.

Recommendations

1. The US should target genuinely equitable partnerships by creating joint development initiatives with a shift from the donor-recipient model to co-sponsored development initiatives where both the US and African states not only contribute to their design and implementation but also share risks, resources, and benefits of such projects. Emphasis should also be given to funding projects initiated and led by African countries and organisations to meet local needs and priorities.
2. The US should further enhance fair trade relations by expanding or redesigning existing trade agreements to favour African exports and support African businesses, reducing tariffs and barriers to access US markets. Investment in programs that help African industries improve their production capacity and meet international standards, facilitating smoother access to global markets, should be a US priority.
3. There should be mutual learning and capacity building by creating knowledge platforms for sharing best practices and lessons learned between US and African leaders in various sectors, from governance to business development, focusing on training programs that enhance skills and capacities of local leaders and institutions, empowering them to lead their development efforts.
4. The US need to transform its aid model to include local input by designing aid programs that require collaboration with local communities and governments to ensure relevance and sustainability, as well as empowering local actors to reduce dependency on aid to foster self-sufficiency.
5. Africa, on its part, must continue to build and strengthen regional integration, such as the African Union (AU) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), to present a well-articulated and united agenda in negotiations with the US, thereby increasing its agency and leadership globally.

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