

Africa and the Decline of American Primacy

By **Hisham Aidi**

The Biden administration has recently begun unveiling the broad contours of its African policy. If the Trump administration had disparaged African states, imposing a travel ban that affected African states, and denounced Chinese-supported infrastructure projects as “debt traps,” the Biden administration has sought to present itself as different from its predecessor. On November 18 2021, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken gave a speech outlining US’s new African strategy, and warned of China’s growing influence on the continent, without mentioning the Asian state by name. Aware that African states do not want to be made to choose between the US and China, he the American diplomat spoke at the headquarters of ECOWAS in Abuja, Nigeria, Blinken spoke in allusions: “I want to be clear: the US does not want to limit your partnerships with other countries. We want to make your partnerships with us even stronger. We don’t want to make you choose.”¹ Blinken expressed concern over rising extremism, corruption and democratic back-sliding on the continent, while assuring his audience that the US would be more transparent and engaged with Africa. He also said, “Too often, international infrastructure deals are opaque, coercive. They burden countries with unmanageable debt. They’re environmentally destructive. They don’t always benefit the people who live there. We will do things differently.” Judd Devermont, a senior CIA

official who recently joined the National Security Council as a special adviser on Africa, also recently spoke of the need for a new US policy towards Africa that does not neglect democracy in supporting regimes that cooperate on counter-terrorism. As Devermont wrote last summer, an American policy shift would necessitate “significant divestment from traditional counterterrorism and security focused policies and programs – which have had minimal success in the Sahel during the past two decades – and renewed investments in democratic institutions.”²

The irony is that while Devermont was calling for more democracy promotion, and Blinken warning of Chinese influence (without mentioning China), the House of Representatives was set to vote on the proposed 2022 National Defense Authorization Act which would (legally) allow the Pentagon to channel military and economic assistance to African states to counter Russian and Chinese influence. The stated objective of this initiative is to fight “coercion by non-peer rivals” against African states by bolstering their militaries and addressing various “sources of insecurity” on the continent.³ This initiative runs counter to Blinken’s proposed strategy of supporting democracy, as does the fact that the US has

1. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-19/u-s-intent-on-forging-closer-ties-with-africa-blinken-says>

2. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/false-choices-us-policy-toward-coastal-west-africa-and-sahel>

3. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/11/19/senate-eyeing-failed-cold-war-era-plan-to-send-military-aid-to-africa/>

long provided military assistance to the authoritarian regimes of Uganda and Niger, and training to Mali and Guinea where (America-trained) officers have carried out coups. The Secretary of State's attempt to distance Biden's policy from the Trump administration, which put a travel ban on a number of African states with Muslim populations (including Niger, Sudan, Tanzania, Nigeria and Eritrea), was also not well-served by the recent announcement that, because of the Omicron COVID-19 variant the US was imposing travel restrictions on southern African states (including South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique and Malawi).⁴

Despite the Biden administration's attempt to shift the tone and reset policy towards Africa, the continent still gets little attention from the American foreign policy establishment and when it does it is viewed through the prism of security and containment. A useful way to understand the paradoxical American policies and rhetoric about Africa is by understanding that American hegemony is not what it, at the height of "unipolar moment," was in the 1990s and early 2000s, and that Western powers do not have a monopoly over the provision of patronage and public goods on the continent.

Cold War Legacies:

As political scientists Zachariah Mampilly and Stearns have observed, "while Trump's Africa policy may seem to be a departure, its broad contours have changed, its broad contours have changed little from recent administrations."⁵ Current US policy to Africa was shaped by the Cold War, and efforts to counter the Soviet Union. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the African continent faded from America's purview. "Ultimately, we see very little traditional strategic interest in Africa," stated a 1991 Defense Department report.⁶ Following the failed intervention in Somalia in 1993, Washington would adopt a policy of support for market-friendly, pro-American autocrats in Ethiopia, Uganda and Rwanda.

The War on Terror would deepen this trend. To counter movements like al-Shabab, in 2002, the US established

the Combined Joint Task Force to the Horn of Africa, based in Djibouti. The Pan-Sahel Initiative was set subsequently set up to contain similar groups in Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso. In 2007, the Africa Command (AFRICOM) was set up, headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany, and today has an estimated 36 missions in Africa, deploying 6000-7000 troops in 18 countries to train and support local African forces.⁷ As Mampilly and Stearns note, with the onset of the War on Terror, "terrorism and trade became the core national interests" – and "even the pretense of concern for democracy and human rights was abandoned for many countries."⁸

State Power and Patronage:

Despite this purported expansion of American power in Africa, as Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nixon explain in their recent book *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order*, America and Western allies are no longer the main purveyors of patronage in Africa or the developing world. Nowadays there are rising states with hegemonic aspirations who are engaged in building "counter-orders" and distributing billions of dollars in assistance. According to "power transition" theory advanced by realist scholars like A.F.K Organski and Robert Gilpin, reigning hegemony will be challenged by rising "revisionist states" who seek to re-write the rules of international relations, and alter the balance of power; the shift to a new hegemonic order usually leads to war.⁹ The balance of power situation and alliance system in Africa is shifting. Over the past twenty years, like their Latin American counterparts, African states have begun moving out of America's orbit. China is currently Africa's largest trading partner, with a continent-wide economic presence as seen in range of infrastructure projects, and \$143 billion distributed in loans.¹⁰ Russia, Turkey and the Gulf states are also increasingly providing financial assistance, and involved in proxy conflicts and conflict resolution from Somalia to the Sahel.

The new security competition taking place in Africa shows that the post-1990 era of unchallenged American preponderance is coming to an end. The US enjoyed rapid

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7. <https://theintercept.com/2020/02/27/africa-us-military-bases-africom/>
 8. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/a-new-direction-for-u-s-foreign-policy-in-africa>
 9. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doiabs/10.1177/0022343397034001003>
 10. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2020/04/20/china-and-africas-debt-yes-to-relief-no-to-blanket-forgiveness/>

4. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-impose-travel-curbs-eight-southern-african-countries-over-new-covid-19-2021-11-26/>

5. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/a-new-direction-for-u-s-foreign-policy-in-africa>

6. <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=724428>

economic growth and technological advancement during the 1990s, and with the collapse of the USSR, it faced no competing ideological project. As the anchor of the post-Cold War institutional order, the US (and its allies) had a monopoly on patronage to the developing world. Less developed countries in need of military assistance had to turn to the West; those in need of development assistance and economic bail-out packages had to accept IMF and World Bank conditionalities. Today China and Russia are providing an alternative to the West, launching regional organizations and supporting illiberal transnational networks that counter American influence.¹¹ It's worth recalling that in April 1997, the Chinese president Jiang Zemin and then Russian president Boris Yeltsin promised to “promote the multipolarization of the world and the establishment of a new international order.”¹² Twenty-five years later this vision seems to be becoming reality. As Cooley and Nixon write, “Today, other great powers offer rival conceptions of global order, often autocratic ones that appeal to many leaders of weaker states.”¹³

The rising hegemony are creating alternative international institutions, regional organizations and inter-state networks. The first summit of the grouping of emerging economies known as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India and China – and more recently South Africa) was first held in Russia in 2009. Seven years later the BRICS launched the New Development Bank, aimed at financing infrastructure-building across the developing world.¹⁴ There are also new security organizations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the (Chinese-backed) Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Russian-sponsored Eurasian Economic Union. To counter the “cohesion of traditional Western blocs,” China and Russia are also forging partnerships with in different regions. Since 2021, China has regularly convened the 17+1 summits (China-CEEC) to promote business between China and sixteen countries of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the forum between China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (China-CELAC).¹⁵ The “counter-ordering” is happening on the African continent as well. The eighth

meeting of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) took place in Dakar, Senegal last month, wherein Xi Jinping promised that Beijing would supply on billion doses of COVID-19 vaccine to the continent, greater Chinese investment in poverty reduction projects and green development.¹⁶ Since 2009, China has been Africa's largest trading partner, with Chinese companies relocating to the African continent; in contrast, as recently as 2017, American exports to Africa were about 1 percent of the US total, and direct investment by American corporations at below one percent.¹⁷

China's Soft Power:

As Lina Benabdallah's recent book *Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations* (2020) demonstrates, a focus on Chinese economic statecraft and military support in Africa overlooks Beijing's equally important efforts to foster social capital and network relations. The book opens with the “central yet complex question: Do all major powers project their influence and power in the same way? Or does China project its power and influence differently from other powers?” Benabdallah details the expansion of networks between military officers in China and Africa through training programs which not only serve to cultivate positive attitudes towards China, but also to spread the Chinese state's way of understanding security and civil-military relations.

Russia is also vying to challenge the status quo in Africa by offering patronage. Moscow has recently signed military agreements with Nigeria and Ethiopia, and is involved in conflicts in Libya, Mali and the Central African Republic. Russia, like China, presents itself as an alternative to Western states. At the first Russia-Africa Summit in 2019, Putin declared that Russia was “not going to participate in a new ‘repartition’ of the continent's wealth; rather we are ready to engage in competition for cooperation with Africa.”¹⁸ In effect when American legislators held up \$1 billion in arms to Nigeria amidst allegations of human rights violations by Nigerian security forces (during the SARS protests), Russia stepped into sell military

11. <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/exit-from-hegemony-9780190916473?cc=us&lang=en&>

12. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/211354887>

13. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-09/how-hegemony-ends>

14. <https://www.ndb.int/media/first-project-financed-brics-new-development-bank-starts-operation/>

15. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202106/09/WS60bfb86ba31024ad0bac470a.html>

16. <https://african.business/2021/11/trade-investment/what-can-africa-expect-from-focac-2021/>

17. <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c0019.html> <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/a-new-direction-for-u-s-foreign-policy-in-africa>

18. <https://saiia.org.za/research/the-bear-is-back-russian-re-engagement-with-africa-is-picking-up-with-putin-in-the-driving-seat/>

equipment and technology to the Nigerian army.¹⁹ When Secretary of State Blinken said the Ethiopian army of engaging in “ethnic cleansing” in Tigray,²⁰ Ethiopian state officials met with the Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, after which Moscow not only supplied arms to Addis Ababa, but also sent election observers to Ethiopia to legitimate elections called by Prime Minister Aby.²¹ The European Union on the other hand, withdrew its observers, claiming “ongoing violence across the country, human rights violations and political tensions, harassment of media workers and detained opposition members.”²² In the Central African Republic, since 2013, president Faustin-Archange Touadéra has been faced with a coalition of rebel groups called the Seleka (battling the anti-Balaka forces); in 2017, he turned to Russia for assistance. Today Moscow is not only training the military in the Central African Republic, but Russian private security firms are active in Bangui (but also allegedly in Mali and Sudan, though the Kremlin says it has nothing to do with the Wagner Group.)²³

Theorizing Hegemony:

A decade ago the debate around American primacy was between liberals like John Ikenberry who argued in *After Victory* (2000) and *Liberal Leviathan* (2011) that there was no counter-balancing against the United States after the Cold War because America was a benign hegemon, a “liberal Leviathan” that created a liberal institutional architecture that provided public goods for all, and that practiced strategic restraint; and scholars Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth who argued in *A World Out of Balance* (2008), that there was no counter-balancing because American power was so overweening and preponderant such that there were no systemic constraints on American action. In their words, America could easily disrupt the balance of power: “the United States can push hard and even unilaterally for revisions in the international system without sparking counter-balancing , risking the erosion of its ability to cooperate within international institutions, jeopardizing the gains

of globalization, or undermining the overall legitimacy of its role.”²⁴ In fact they concluded that nowadays the configuration of global power was so lopsided that “theories that were first invented, for example, in periods of multipolarity, may be irrelevant today.” Both these arguments now appear to have been ill-conceived. Ikenberry, as critics have noted ignored the developing world in his analyses of the American-backed liberal order, and Brooks and Wohlforth underestimated the impact of decades of war and domestic inequality on American prevalence.

The security competition playing out in Africa is evidence of counter-balancing and counter-ordering by other states (mainly Russia and China), and must be viewed in a larger context of American decline. The declinist thesis was ascendant in the 1980s, when historian Paul Kennedy warned of “imperial overstretch” as analysts watched the economic takeoff of Japan and the East Asian developmental states, and Germany’s economic expansion.²⁵ When the USSR disintegrated, and Japan embarked on a decade of stagflation, such predictions proved premature. Today however after two decades of war and geopolitical overreach, economic inequality and political gridlock, aspiring hegemons are challenging America’s primacy. The Great Power transition is playing out, in part, in Africa.

19. <https://www.reuters.com/world/nigeria-signs-military-cooperation-agreement-with-russia-2021-08-25/>

20. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/10/politics/blinken-tigray-ethnic-cleansing/index.html>

21. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/13/russia-is-building-military-influence-in-africa-challenging-us-france.html>

22. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/06/18/ethiopia-declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union/>

23. <https://www.ft.com/content/846e2ae6-6378-40f1-a016-831c268910d1>

24. <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691137841/world-out-of-balance>

25. <https://www.amazon.com/Rise-Fall-Great-Powers/dp/0679720197>

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the author.



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