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“Africa First”: A New Vision for Africa’s Growth and US Engagement

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Executive Summary

US-Africa relations are entering a critical juncture. President Donald Trump’s “America First” approach is reshaping how the United States engages with Africa, with implications for trade, aid and geopolitics. Under the new administration, US-Africa relations will be explicitly pursued within the context of US interests, with President Trump's second administration expecting engagement with the continent to deliver tangible benefits.

This shift in US foreign policy presents a challenge, but it also highlights the need for Africa to assert its own agency and underlines the importance of fostering partnerships that align with Africa’s vision for growth, development and self-reliance. By prioritising homegrown solutions and strengthening intra-African collaboration, the continent can define its developmental trajectory and reduce its vulnerability to external policy shifts. How leaders across the globe choose to respond to the shifting geopolitical landscape could determine whether this era enables progress or deepens existing inequalities.

President Trump’s first week in office set a clear tone for his administration’s priorities. The adoption of an “America First” trade policy signalled a shift towards prioritising domestic economic interests over multilateral agreements. The decision to withdraw from the World Health Organisation raised questions about global health cooperation and the future of international partnerships. The announcement of a 90-day suspension of development-cooperation disbursements and the move to shut down the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have created uncertainty around US foreign assistance. The president’s withdrawal from the Paris Agreement demonstrated a retreat from global climate commitments, while the “Unleashing American Energy” policy prioritised domestic oil, gas and critical minerals, highlighting a focus on energy independence and resource extraction.

Looking ahead, programmes such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act face uncertainty as President Trump champions tariffs, while health and climate programmes critical to Africa’s development face funding risks. On the global stage, US competition with China for access to Africa’s critical minerals and markets further complicates matters, placing African nations in the crosshairs of great-power rivalry.

But countries in Africa are not without leverage. The continent is home to vast reserves of critical minerals essential for the global green and digital transitions, and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is creating the world’s largest free-trade bloc, boosting its strategic importance. To seize this moment, the continent should embrace an “Africa First” strategy, leveraging its immense resources and youthful population to chart a path of equitable partnerships, self-reliance and sustainable growth. This approach centres on five transformative priorities:

- **Prioritise intra-African trade:** The AfCFTA has the potential to reshape Africa’s economy by creating the largest free-trade bloc in the world. By reducing tariffs and eliminating trade barriers, it offers unparalleled opportunities for industrialisation, mobility and inclusive growth. Leaders must act boldly to implement its framework, streamline customs processes, implement trade-facilitation reforms, and ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can fully access its benefits.
- **Modernise trade with integrated networks:** Initiatives such as the Trade Worldwide Information Network (TWIN) can revolutionise Africa’s digital trade infrastructure. Combining blockchain-enabled solutions with investments in logistics and transportation has the potential to simplify cross-border processes, cut delays, reduce costs and ensure efficiency, unlocking the full promise of AfCFTA to foster regional trade.
- **Secure data sovereignty:** Africa must control its digital future by investing in local data infrastructure, including data centres, trade networks and high-speed connectivity. Processing and protecting data within the continent will ensure sovereignty, support local innovation and prevent exploitation by foreign entities. Aligning policies across borders and collaborating on skills and technology exchange can further build a secure and unified digital economy.
- **Build local value chains:** Africa’s critical-minerals reserves, essential for global green and digital transitions, offer an opportunity to move beyond raw-material exports. Investing in processing and refining industries can

boost economic value, create jobs and drive industrialisation. Regional initiatives such as the Lobito Corridor – a railway stretching from Lobito in Angola to Kolwezi in Democratic Republic of Congo – can address infrastructure gaps and promote collective progress.

- **Invest in talent development:** With the youngest workforce globally, Africa’s greatest asset is its people. By equipping the workforce with skills in areas such as artificial intelligence, cyber-security and advanced computing, the continent can build robust digital economies that encourage growth. Public-private partnerships and regional frameworks will ensure that Africa’s workforce drives and benefits from this transformation.

An “Africa First” policy allows leaders to guard against waning external support and align development goals with continental priorities. At the same time, the US has an opportunity to support an “Africa First” agenda by adopting a more strategic, investment-driven approach through the US International Development Finance Corporation and any entity that may replace USAID, ensuring streamlined processes that deliver measurable, high-impact results. Aligning its engagement with Africa’s vision for integration and development will allow the US to build equitable, mutually beneficial relationships that strengthen Africa’s role as a global partner while advancing shared prosperity.

The key, however, will be ensuring that this engagement happens within an African-led framework. Kenya’s President William Ruto captured this when he quoted former Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah: “Many people want to pull us into a conversation as to whether we are facing East or we are facing West. Let me tell you, we are neither facing East nor West, we are facing forward, because that is where the opportunities are.”[1]

By seizing this moment to prioritise their own interests, countries in Africa can turn the challenges of a US-centric foreign policy into an era of self-reliance and prosperity. This is a time for bold leadership, strategic alliances and a united commitment to an “Africa First” future.

02

The US in Africa

The relationship between the US and Africa has been shaped by global geopolitical trends and domestic priorities. US engagement during the Cold War often prioritised countering communism, resulting in support for authoritarian regimes such as Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)) under Mobutu Sese Seko and South Africa under apartheid. While some infrastructure and military investments were made, they often entrenched corruption and conflict. Initiatives such as the establishment of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Peace Corps under President John F Kennedy in 1961 marked a shift towards development-oriented diplomacy. These programmes provided valuable support but frequently served broader US geopolitical goals, such as tying aid to the purchase of American goods or structural-adjustment programmes mandated by the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund, creating a perception in Africa of US aid being self-serving and externally driven.

The end of the Cold War ushered in new dynamics. President Bill Clinton's administration pivoted towards economic development, introducing the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) to promote trade by offering duty-free access to US markets. However, this economic focus coincided with a lack of action during some of Africa’s darkest moments, including the Rwandan genocide, the Somali civil war and the rise of al-Qaeda in Africa. The 1990s underscored the limitations of US engagement when security was deprioritised.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks marked another transitional moment in US-Africa relations under President George W Bush, who expanded counterterrorism efforts and established the Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2007 to consolidate US military initiatives on the continent. President Bush's administration also launched the transformative President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), which has saved millions of lives and strengthened health infrastructure. Building on President Bush’s initiatives, President Barack Obama emphasised investment, governance and youth through programmes such as Power Africa, the Young African Leaders Initiative

(YALI) and the 2014 US-Africa Leaders Summit. However, President Obama's focus on governance and human rights sometimes clashed with African leaders, particularly over issues such as LGBTQ+ rights.

Meanwhile, China's approach to Africa, characterised by its focus on large-scale infrastructure projects and substantial financial packages with fewer conditions on human rights or governance, has positioned it as a preferred partner for many African nations. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, and pledges such as $50 billion in support through the 2024 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation[2] exemplify China's commitment to addressing Africa's developmental needs while serving its own strategic interests.

This has raised concerns in the US, which views China's growing footprint as a direct challenge to its interests in the region. In response, the US is backing infrastructure projects such as the Lobito Corridor, a key trade route linking Angola's Lobito port via rail to the mineral-rich regions of Zambia and DRC, and strengthening partnerships to counterbalance China's influence. This rivalry exemplifies Africa's strategic importance and the urgency for the US to assert its influence on the continent.

Despite strides towards promoting trade, investment and self-reliance, US-Africa relations remain characterised by asymmetries of power.

President Trump's First Term

During his first term, President Donald Trump's approach to US-Africa relations reflected his "America First" policy. His administration deprioritised Africa as it focused on reducing foreign aid, curbing immigration and emphasising US security interests. President Trump was the first US leader in decades not to visit Africa while in office, symbolising a shift away from high-profile diplomatic engagement.

The 2017 National Security Strategy reflected this shift, prioritising sovereignty and direct US benefits over liberal internationalism. For example, regions such as Asia, particularly the Indo-Pacific, received heightened strategic focus, while Africa and Latin America saw a reduction in focus.

Despite this, President Trump introduced initiatives such as Prosper Africa, aimed at promoting US private-sector investment in African markets, and the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), which funded development projects across the continent. These programmes sought to pivot US engagement towards mutually beneficial economic partnerships rather than traditional aid models. As of December 2024, Prosper Africa had closed 2,498 deals across 49 countries for a total estimated value of $120.3 billion, while the DFC has invested more than $10 billion, demonstrating its significant impact.

African responses to President Trump’s policies were mixed. While some leaders appreciated the less interventionist stance on governance, others criticised the administration’s reduced support for multilateralism and development aid.

President Biden’s Legacy and Handover

President Joe Biden’s administration sought to return US-Africa engagement to a focus on health programmes, democracy promotion and trade facilitation. Sustained support for PEPFAR, the President’s Malaria Initiative (PMI) and pandemic-response efforts reaffirmed the US commitment to improving health outcomes across Africa. President Biden also prioritised democratic governance and human rights, demonstrated by sanctions against Uganda following its enactment of the Anti-Homosexuality Act in 2023.

President Biden revitalised trade efforts by backing AGOA and engaging with the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), a framework seen as transformative for regional economic integration. The administration also announced a $55 billion investment over three years in infrastructure, health and energy during the 2022 US-Africa Leaders Summit. High-level engagements, such as hosting Kenya’s President William Ruto for the first African state visit in more than 15 years and President Biden’s own state visit to Angola, signalled a renewed commitment to the continent. These visits highlighted US interest in infrastructure investments, including the Lobito Corridor, aligning with Africa’s push for industrialisation.

In one of their final acts under President Biden’s administration, US lawmakers – recognising the ebb and flow of US interest in Africa in recent times and the potential deprioritisation of the continent under President Trump – included a provision in the annual defence bill mandating biennial US-Africa leaders’ summits. This provision would compel President Trump to invite African heads of state to Washington, ensuring continued dialogue between US and African counterparts.

While President Biden’s policies demonstrated a renewed focus on collaboration, their outcomes were mixed. Climate action featured prominently, with initiatives such as the Just Energy Transition Partnerships, but African nations expressed frustration over the pace and scale of US support for adaptation and mitigation efforts. Less than 5 per cent of USAID’s budget under President Biden was allocated to core economic-growth programmes, with the majority focused on funding for basic needs. This frustrated many African leaders who have called for trade, investment and economic growth as pathways to self-reliance, rather than dependency on aid.

Similarly, renewed US involvement in security partnerships faced challenges in aligning with African-led strategies, particularly in regions grappling with terrorism. The US withdrawal from Niger in 2024 exemplifies these struggles, marking a significant setback in its counterterrorism operations in the Sahel region. With its military influence diminished following the coup in Niger, the US shifted its focus to potential new partnerships with coastal nations such as Ghana, Benin and Côte d’Ivoire. These efforts, while promising, again highlight the limitations of US engagement in addressing the complex dynamics within Africa, where anti-West sentiment and competition with other global actors such as Russia further complicate efforts to maintain influence and stability.[3]

03

"America First" Foreign Policy: Implications for Africa

The return of an "America First" agenda under President Trump is poised to disrupt US-Africa relations with a focus on conservative policies, cuts to foreign aid and a reduced emphasis on global challenges such as climate change. The administration's approach risks dismantling entrenched systems and longstanding partnerships, creating uncertainty for African nations that have relied on US support through foreign aid, investment and trade. While we argue that this shift could also pave the way for more equitable relationships based on self-reliance, the focus on tariffs and reduced engagement risks driving African nations towards greater entrenchment with other global powers, further altering the geopolitical balance and diminishing US influence on the continent.

Trade: AGOA and Tariffs

As his first weeks in office have shown, tariffs are set to be central to President Trump's administration. The move from aid to trade – shaped in part by AGOA – has been an important aspect of US-Africa relations in recent decades. Over the past 20 years, AGOA has supported Africa's exports in sectors such as textiles, agriculture and manufactured goods, with the aim of promoting economic development and job creation.

During his first term, President Trump hinted that he would not renew AGOA, which is due to expire in September. While not all African economies have seen significant benefits from AGOA, the threat to preferential market access for African exporters sends a signal about the US's commitment to fostering trade relations with Africa, potentially undermining trust and long-term partnerships. The end – or even a weakening – of AGOA would increase costs and reduce competitiveness. This is particularly concerning for countries such as Kenya, Lesotho and Eswatini, whose economies have benefited from AGOA-supported industries. For example, Kenya sends 67.6 per cent of its textile exports to the US under the act, resulting in export sales rising from $55 million to $603 million over the past two decades.[4]

While Africa is not the primary target of President Trump's tariff policies, his broader tariff-centric approach – such as proposing up to 20 per cent tariffs on all imported goods[5] – indicates a shift in attitude towards international trade that could have grave implications for African nations. This change risks shrinking market opportunities for exporters on the continent, exacerbating trade deficits and undermining economic growth. President Trump has also shown strong opposition to the BRICS group, an alliance of emerging economies, particularly in terms of its efforts to challenge the US dollar's dominance in international trade. He has threatened 100 per cent tariffs on BRICS countries, a bloc that includes South Africa, Ethiopia and Egypt, and which has attracted interest from several other African nations.[6]

While President Trump is expected to impose tariffs across the board, he is particularly targeting another BRICS member, China, in order to counterbalance its economic influence. While this may initially appear to benefit African producers by reducing competition from cheaper Chinese goods, the overall impact may in fact be negative. African economies, deeply intertwined with China's trade ecosystem as their largest bilateral trading partner, could face higher costs for imported goods, potentially disrupting supply chains and stalling manufacturing growth. Higher tariffs could also mean lower demand for Chinese goods, which would reduce China's demand for raw materials and commodities from Africa. A weaker Chinese economy could also mean a reduction in the level of Chinese investment in Africa's infrastructure projects, leading to delays or cancellation of ongoing projects.

Foreign Aid

In recent years, Africa has relied heavily on US aid. This has totalled between $7.7 billion and $8.3 billion annually over the past decade for sub-Saharan Africa, with approximately 70 per cent of this directed towards health programmes.[7] During President Trump's first term, the administration signalled a shift on foreign aid, including a reduction in health-care support across Africa. Programmes targeting maternal and reproductive health, malaria and other tropical diseases saw proposed budget reductions, aligning with broader goals of fiscal restraint and a reallocation of resources towards domestic priorities. While the administration's approach was transactional, it also sought – through the operations of USAID and the DFC – to be more streamlined, efficient and less bureaucratic.

After his return to office, President Trump immediately ordered a 90-day pause in foreign aid to review its alignment with his foreign-policy priorities. The State Department issued a stop-work order worldwide that included existing assistance, calling into question billions of dollars of aid. While a federal judge later ruled that the administration must reverse the order, giving USAID a lifeline, its future remains in the balance.

REDUCTIONS IN HEALTH-CARE FUNDING

One notable example of President Trump's stance on foreign aid was the proposed $1.2 billion cut to PEPFAR, the US's global effort to combat HIV, in his first term. While this proposal did not fully materialise due to bipartisan congressional support for PEPFAR, it underlined the administration's intention to reduce US global health assistance. Similarly, the budget proposal included significant cuts to funding for the PMI, which plays a critical role in combating malaria in sub-Saharan Africa.

Maternal and reproductive-health programmes, including those funded through USAID, also faced reductions in President Trump's first term. The reinstatement and expansion of the Mexico City Policy, which was introduced during the Ronald Reagan administration and restricts US funding to foreign non-governmental organisations providing or promoting abortion services, indirectly impacted broader reproductive-health services, especially in regions where integrated health systems rely on overlapping funding streams.

While proposed reductions to global health funding in President Trump's first term raised concerns, the US Congress played a critical role in mitigating the full impact of these proposals. For instance, despite proposed cuts, US funding for PEPFAR and PMI remained largely intact, highlighting the bipartisan support for these programmes and their recognised value in promoting health security.

President Trump’s return to office brings renewed uncertainty, particularly with Republican majorities in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, albeit with narrow margins, providing him with an environment conducive to advancing his policy agenda, and increasing the likelihood of policies that reduce development aid to countries in Africa. Compounding this risk, President Trump announced on his first day back in office that the US would withdraw from the World Health Organisation. This move threatens to disrupt health programmes in Africa, including disease prevention, vaccinations and emergency health responses.

Reductions in global health funding have direct economic and social implications. Health challenges such as malaria already cost African economies $12 billion annually in lost productivity, while reduced access to maternal and reproductive-health services could drive higher fertility rates, straining resources like education and housing. These pressures risk slowing economic growth and exacerbating poverty cycles.

Democracy, Security and Climate Change

President Trump’s first term saw a recalibration of US foreign-assistance priorities, with democracy-strengthening initiatives receiving less emphasis compared with strategic security concerns. Programmes aimed at supporting democratic institutions, anti-corruption measures and good governance across Africa were deprioritised, aligning with the administration’s broader focus on cost-effectiveness and immediate returns on US investment.

A potential further rollback of such initiatives in President Trump's second administration could create gaps in institutional support for African democracies. For example, countries transitioning from autocratic regimes or grappling with fragile democratic institutions might face reduced technical and financial assistance. This could limit progress in governance reforms (and create opportunities for authoritarian tendencies to gain traction).

On the security front, President Trump’s preference for burden-sharing and reduced US military engagement might lead to a reconfiguration of security aid to Africa. During his first term, US troop withdrawals from Somalia, where forces had been engaged in combating al-Shabab and ISIS, in preference of airstrikes and reduced funding for counterterrorism operations, reflected a broader shift in strategy towards competition with the likes of China and a reallocation of resources away from direct involvement in Africa’s security challenges.[8,9] The US military airstrike against ISIS in Puntaland, Somalia in early February 2025 – the first major military operation of President Trump’s second term – is an early indication of the administration’s posture in the region, once again rolling back military assistance on the ground in favour of unilateral action to serve its own security interests.[10]

This approach could amplify security challenges for African nations combating terrorism, insurgency and organised crime, particularly in regions such as the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. At the same time, Republican-led advocacy for recognising Somaliland[11] – a self-governing state that declared independence from Somalia in 1991 but remains internationally unrecognised – highlights the ongoing shift in US sentiment away from support for the Somali government.

This push frames the Horn as a strategic counterweight to China’s military presence in Djibouti, and Turkey’s growing influence in Ethiopia and Somalia, without needing military boots on the ground. Recognition of Somaliland will also bring the US into contact with Emirati investment interests, particularly in the port of Berbera, creating another geopolitical hotspot around port development, trade influence and security partnerships.

President Trump is likely to respond positively to African leaders advocating for the principle that Africa should solve Africa’s problems. He will look to Africa’s leadership for solutions in conflict zones and may grow impatient with leaders or factions seen as obstructing progress.

This approach is not without its geopolitical implications. As described in the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change’s (TBI’s) recent work on the Sahel, reduced US involvement might prompt African nations to deepen partnerships with alternative powers such as China, Russia or Turkey to address security needs. This move could reshape the continent’s security architecture, reducing US influence while entrenching the foothold of competing global powers.

CLIMATE-CHANGE INVESTMENTS

Under President Trump’s leadership, the US has scaled back its commitments to international climate agreements, including withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, which the president confirmed on his first day in office.[12] This retreat from global climate leadership has ripple effects on Africa, a region disproportionately affected by climate change.[13]

With floods, droughts and desertification worsening, smallholder farmers – the backbone of Africa’s food systems – face increasing threats to productivity. Climate-smart practices such as agroforestry, crop diversification and improved irrigation are critical for mitigating the effects of climate change and adapting to erratic weather patterns. A shift towards solely focusing on reactive disaster management could undermine efforts to build long-term resilience in agriculture.

The US is also likely to encourage African nations to exploit fossil-fuel reserves as a quick fix for energy shortfalls, aligning with President Trump’s “drill-baby-drill” philosophy. While framed as an economic opportunity, this approach risks fuelling resource-based conflicts and exacerbating corruption and inequality in fragile regions. It also adversely affects Africa’s already divided approach on the transition to sustainable energy and increases its vulnerability to the impacts of climate change, prioritising short-term gains over long-term stability.

Multilateralism and Partnerships

The evolving dynamics of US-Africa relations under President Trump's second administration raise concerns about the risk of a leadership vacuum. Historically, the US has played a significant role in supporting multilateral initiatives and partnerships on the continent. However, a shift toward unilateralism – or “multi-bilateralism” – could diminish attention to regional crises and multilateral partnerships, leaving a gap that other global powers are eager to fill.

A reduced US presence in Africa, whether through diminished diplomatic engagement or decreased investment in foreign aid and multilateral institutions, could lead to increased reliance on partnerships with China, particularly in economic, technological and infrastructure development. While Chinese investments such as those delivered through the BRI have resulted in tangible benefits to many African nations, they have also given rise to some concerns. Several countries have experienced mounting debt burdens linked to Chinese loans, potentially compromising their long-term economic independence. Policymakers must weigh the immediate advantages of Chinese partnerships against the long-term risks of constrained fiscal autonomy and potential over-reliance on a single external actor.

Without a clear strategy to diversify partnerships and maintain balanced relationships, African nations risk becoming overly dependent on external powers whose priorities may not always align with the continent’s aspirations. Over-reliance on any one partner could lead to a development model prioritising resource extraction and infrastructure development without sufficient focus on institution-building, governance reform or the protection of civil liberties.

04

"Africa First" Policy

As global dynamics shift and Africa's strategic importance rises, the continent has an unprecedented opportunity to redefine its development trajectory and strengthen its position in the world through an "Africa First" policy. This is not simply a response to external shifts, such as a more reduced and transactional US foreign policy, but a proactive strategy to align Africa's development with its own long-term economic and political goals. To develop this approach, African nations must formulate strategies to capitalise on the continent's youthful population, critical minerals, natural resources and strategic global position. They should prioritise integration and trade through the AfCFTA and the Trade Worldwide Information Network (TWIN), develop regional value chains, boost economies by investing in technology and data infrastructure, and leverage artificial intelligence.

Expecting nations across Africa to adopt a unified approach to US relations is perhaps unrealistic, with some governments likely to exploit the transactional nature of President Trump's administration to expand their influence. However, by embracing an "Africa First" policy, leaders on the continent can mitigate the risks of diminished external support, reduce dependency on transactional partnerships and ensure their long-term development goals remain aligned with continental priorities. This approach is essential for Africa to assert its agency in a rapidly evolving global context, harness its unique strengths and address its challenges, thereby promoting sustainable development, resilience and global competitiveness.

Prioritising Intra-African Trade

Under the "Africa First" policy, the AfCFTA is not merely desirable, but an essential priority. As the largest free-trade area in the world by sheer numbers – 54 of Africa's 55 nations, 1.3 billion people and a combined GDP of $3.4 trillion – the AfCFTA is designed to enhance regional economic integration, improve supply chains and reduce reliance on non-African markets by removing tariffs on 90 per cent of goods. Established in 2018, the AfCFTA is partially operational, with significant progress in ratifications, tariff offers and digital trade protocols. But challenges remain with non-tariff barriers, infrastructure gaps and political hesitancy all stalling progress.[14] Its successful implementation could unlock unprecedented opportunities for growth and mobility across the continent, while shielding Africa’s economies from global shocks caused by geopolitical shifts or unprecedented events such as a global pandemic.

The creation of this unified market is particularly significant for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which make up the majority of businesses in Africa. The AfCFTA provides these businesses with access to a much larger customer base, stimulating growth and job creation.

Historically, non-tariff barriers and high trading costs have hindered intra-African trade, which currently accounts for only 16 per cent of the continent’s total trade, compared to 68 per cent in Europe and 58 per cent in Asia.[15] The AfCFTA aims to eliminate these barriers by streamlining customs procedures, simplifying trade regulations and harmonising standards across member states. This would facilitate the easier movement of goods, and improve infrastructure and digital trade systems, to reduce delays and costs. By unlocking the potential for intra-African trade, the AfCFTA is expected to boost industrialisation, enabling countries to move up the value chain from raw-material exports to high-value manufacturing. This shift is likely to create jobs across industries such as agriculture, manufacturing and services, while reducing Africa’s vulnerability to global market shocks.

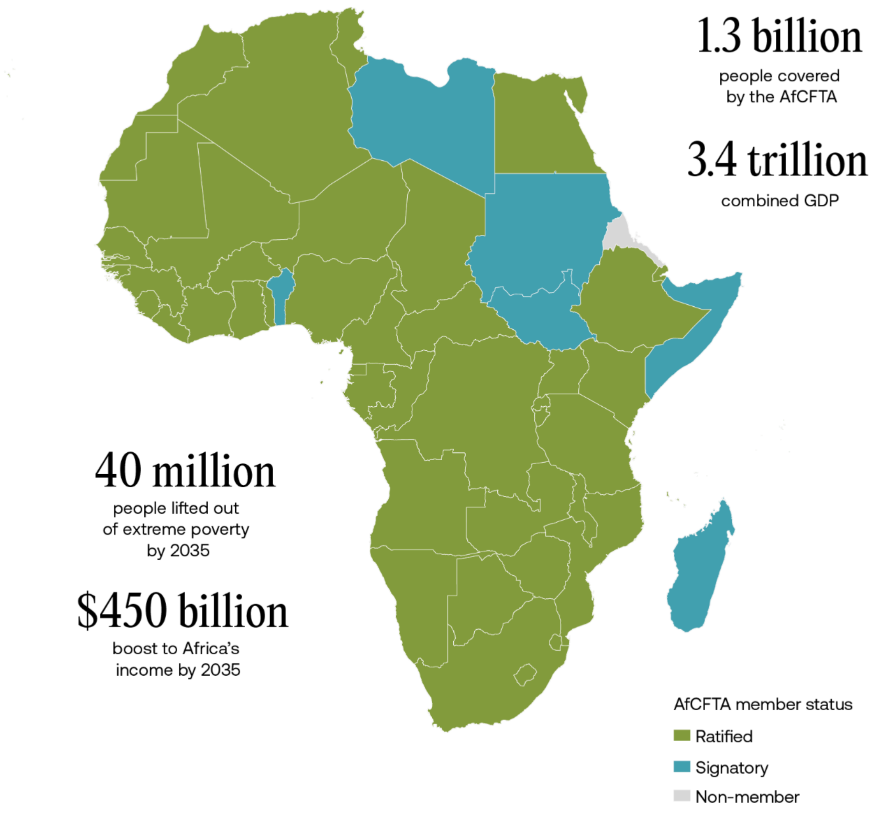
The AfCFTA also has the potential to transform how people move across the continent by promoting visa-free travel and passport-free rules for African nationals. Facilitating easier movement between countries is a crucial step for boosting labour mobility, allowing workers to access job opportunities in regions where their skills are most needed, and supporting industries that depend on cross-border expertise, such as logistics, technology and agriculture. Migration also encourages the transfer of knowledge and skills, which benefits both countries of origin and destination. Migration within Africa is already substantial, with eight out of ten African migrants remaining within the continent and contributing to regional economies. This highlights the importance of legal and safe migration pathways to support economic development.

The AfCFTA's emphasis on intra-African trade and mobility directly supports inclusive economic growth by ensuring that benefits are shared across countries and demographic groups. By reducing dependency on external markets, the agreement enhances Africa's economic resilience, allowing the continent to better withstand global disruptions such as pandemics or supply-chain crises. The potential for the AfCFTA to lift millions out of poverty is significant. According to the World Bank, the agreement could increase regional income by 7 per cent, or around $450 billion, by 2035, while lifting 40 million people out of extreme poverty through enhanced trade and industrialisation.[16] Additionally, a stable and unified market could attract new foreign investments, increasing by up to 159 per cent, as well as a 32 per cent increase in manufacturing exports driven by the new regional value chains.

These potential benefits underscore the importance of African leaders maintaining a singular focus on ensuring the success of the AfCFTA. Achieving this will require bold action and the willingness to make difficult decisions to address current infrastructure, policy and institutional challenges.

FIGURE 1

AfCFTA is being operationalised across the continent



Source: AfCFTA[17]

Modernising Trade With Integrated Networks

THE TRADE WORLDWIDE INFORMATION NETWORK

As TBI has set out in a recent paper on unlocking Africa's trade potential, the Trade Worldwide Information Network (TWIN) represents one important initiative leaders can invest in to modernise African trade by utilising blockchain and distributed-ledger technologies (DLTs). Spearheaded by a consortium of global partners that includes TBI, the platform aims to streamline trade processes, eliminate inefficiencies and improve connectivity across borders. TBI has been instrumental in the development of TWIN, helping design its infrastructure and ensuring it addresses Africa’s unique challenges.

This effort is particularly critical as the full realisation of the AfCFTA has been hindered by institutional delays, inadequate infrastructure and fragmented coordination among member states. TWIN’s ability to digitalise trade processes and harmonise standards across borders directly addresses these barriers, making it a vital tool for unlocking the AfCFTA’s transformative potential and driving Africa’s economic integration.

TWIN can replace cumbersome paper-based systems with digital alternatives, allowing for real-time sharing of critical trade documents such as customs declarations and certificates of origin. Using DLT, these documents are transformed into secure, shareable digital formats. This ensures authenticity and eliminates the risk of loss, forgery or errors commonly associated with traditional paper-based systems. For example, a certificate of origin can be validated in real time by both exporting and importing authorities, streamlining customs processes.

Early trials in Kenya, facilitated by TBI and its partners, have demonstrated TWIN’s ability to reduce trade costs by up to 20 per cent and cut delays, positioning it as a potential cornerstone of the AfCFTA.

By digitalising and streamlining trade processes across borders, TWIN strengthens the AfCFTA and the “Africa First” approach, reducing trade barriers and increasing intra-African commerce.

COOPERATION ON TAX HARMONISATION IN THE EAST AFRICAN COMMUNITY

The East African Community (EAC) is currently losing $1.6 billion annually to smuggling and tax evasion caused by disparities in tax rates among member states.[18] Harmonising regional tax systems is critical for reducing these losses and creating a fairer, more predictable trade environment. TWIN can play a pivotal role here by providing real-time data on trade flows, enabling better tax compliance and reducing opportunities for fraud. By integrating TWIN with the EAC's tax-reform initiatives, member states can significantly boost revenue while reducing trade barriers.

ENCOURAGING REGIONAL INVESTMENTS IN LOGISTICS AND TRANSPORTATION

While TWIN addresses the digital dimension of trade, Africa's economic growth also depends on substantial investments in physical infrastructure. Initiatives such as the Lobito Corridor – backed by US and European Union investments – underscore the importance of modern railways, ports and road networks to facilitate the efficient movement of goods. These investments complement TWIN by ensuring that digital systems are integrated with well-functioning logistics networks, enabling smoother and faster trade flows across the continent. TBI continues to advocate for aligning these physical and digital systems to maximise Africa's trade potential.

Securing Data Sovereignty and Driving the Digital Economy

DATA SOVEREIGNTY

The ability to control and protect data generated within Africa is crucial for economic and political independence, aligning with an "Africa First" policy that prioritises self-reliance and development. By storing, processing and analysing data locally, African nations can safeguard their sovereignty, prevent exploitation by foreign technology companies or states and retain control over their most valuable digital assets. A well-executed continental data-sovereignty strategy can drive economic growth, strengthen governance and foster local innovation, ensuring that Africa's data benefit its people, rather than serving external entities.

By investing in foundational digital infrastructure such as local and regional data centres, cloud storage and high-speed internet connectivity, African nations can reduce reliance on foreign tech giants and ensure that sensitive information remains within the continent. This not only enhances cyber-security and compliance with local regulations but also mitigates risks associated with storing critical data abroad, such as exposure to foreign surveillance or data manipulation. Moreover, it empowers African governments to retain control over the economic value derived from data, enabling them to shape their economies to meet the needs of local populations and businesses.

While local innovation must be prioritised, complete technological self-reliance is neither realistic nor desirable. Strategic partnerships with global tech giants such as Oracle, Microsoft and Amazon Web Services can provide critical infrastructure and advanced technology, as well as expertise and funding, but these agreements must be structured to serve Africa’s long-term interests. These partnerships must include:

- Enforceable technology-transfer mechanisms, ensuring African firms and governments gain the expertise needed to develop and maintain their own digital ecosystems.
- Mandatory local-content requirements, compelling multinationals to invest in African technology talent and infrastructure, rather than simply extracting value.
- Capacity-building programmes focused on training local engineers, data scientists and cyber-security experts to bridge the digital-skills gap.

Negotiating strong terms ensures that African nations can leverage the expertise of multinational companies while empowering its local tech ecosystem. This balanced approach ensures rapid technological advancement and sustainable economic growth, with benefits remaining within the continent.

ADDRESSING THE DATA DEFICIT

One of the most notable barriers to Africa’s economic progress is the absence of reliable, granular investment data. This information asymmetry contributes to inflated perceptions of risk, deterring investors and leading to higher borrowing costs. The International Monetary Fund has noted that sub-Saharan African countries face an “Africa premium”[19] on interest rates, meaning they are charged higher rates than other emerging markets, despite similar risk profiles. This discrepancy stems from factors such as perceived financial opacity, fragmented and underdeveloped capital markets, and regulatory unpredictability.

The reality is that African infrastructure projects have significantly lower default rates (5.5 per cent) than those in Asia (8.5 per cent) or Latin America (13 per cent),[20] yet investors overestimate risks such as currency devaluation and sovereign defaults due to a lack of structured data. Without accurate, transparent investment data, Africa remains disadvantaged in global financial markets. To correct this imbalance, countries across Africa must:

- Develop standardised and real-time investment-data platforms to provide transparency and lower perceived risks.
- Strengthen regional data-sharing mechanisms, ensuring that credit-risk assessments reflect actual market conditions rather than outdated perceptions.
- Leverage digital tools such as AI and DLTs to improve financial tracking, reduce fraud and enhance investor confidence.

BUILDING A UNIFIED DIGITAL ECONOMY

Developing Africa-wide digital standards through platforms such as the AfCFTA offers a pathway to create a unified and secure digital economy, which could include cross-border payments through the Pan-African Payment & Settlement System (PAPSS), GDPR-style data-protection frameworks, consistent digital-taxation rules, e-procurement and trade platforms, and coordinated cyber-security protocols. Collaborative efforts among African governments to establish shared digital infrastructure – such as pan-African fibre-optic networks – can significantly reduce costs, promote cross-border innovation and ensure that African data policies are aligned with the continent's priorities. These initiatives will not only enhance Africa's global competitiveness but also ensure that data-driven economies contribute meaningfully to the continent's growth.

By investing in foundational digital infrastructure, promoting regional cooperation and ensuring data ownership, Africa can claim its digital narrative. This strategy enables the continent to harness the full potential of its data, fostering innovation, strengthening economies and safeguarding political independence in an increasingly interconnected world.

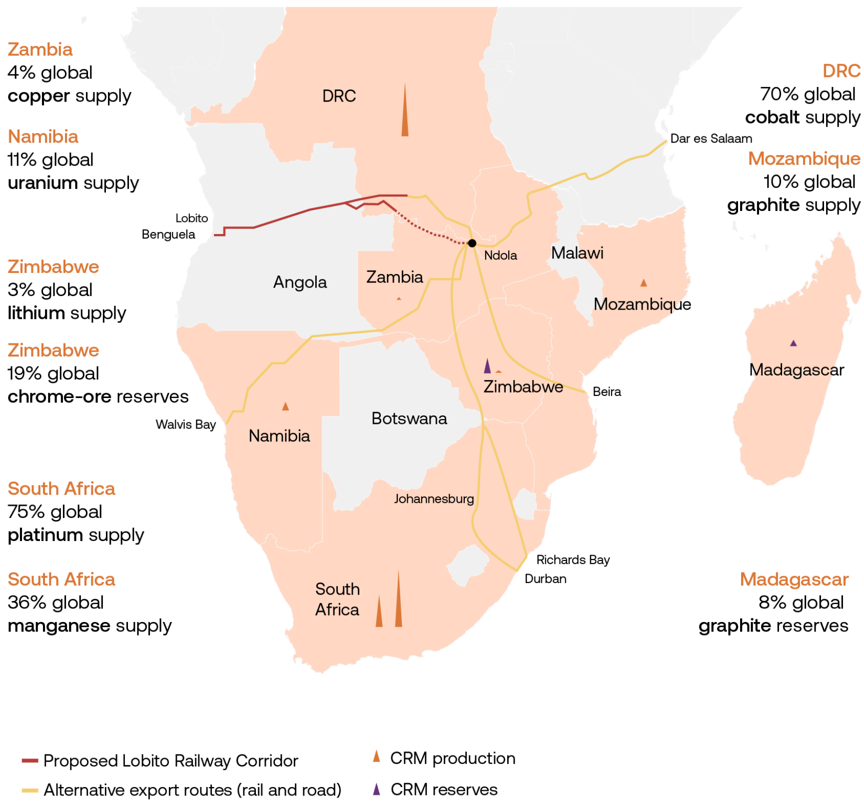
Building Local Value Chains

Africa holds some of the world's largest deposits of critical minerals such as cobalt, lithium and copper, which are vital resources for the global green economy. In one of his last acts as US leader, President Joe Biden visited Lobito, Angola, which serves as a key access point to some of the richest reserves of critical minerals in Southern and Central Africa. These minerals, essential for advancing the green-energy transition, have driven the US and other G7 countries to invest more than $6 billion[21] in developing a 1,344km railway line connecting the cobalt, lithium and copper mines in DRC, and the copper-belt region of Zambia, to Lobito on the Atlantic Ocean.[22]

The historical model of exporting raw materials, however, has left little value within the continent. Moving beyond this model to focus on local processing and refining – while maximising the benefits of the Lobito Corridor – is essential for an "Africa First" strategy that will create jobs, boost industrialisation and contain greater economic value from these resources within the continent.

FIGURE 2

Reserves and transportation routes for critical raw materials in Southern Africa



Source: TBI analysis

ADDING VALUE TO RAW MATERIALS

Exporting raw ore deprives African nations of the economic benefits of downstream activities, such as refining and manufacturing, which generate higher returns. The African Mining Vision, adopted in 2009, emphasises that localised efforts in refining and processing should take place to ensure that minerals contribute to sustainable development. This approach shifts Africa away from its legacy as a supplier of cheap raw materials towards becoming a hub for processed goods and advanced technologies.

Case Studies in Local Processing

ZIMBABWE: LITHIUM REFINING

Zimbabwe’s 2022 ban on exporting raw lithium has prompted companies, including Chinese firms, to invest in processing facilities within the country. This policy aims to integrate Zimbabwe into the global value chain for electric vehicle (EV) batteries while creating local employment and fostering industrial development.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO: COBALT AND COPPER

DRC is a global leader in cobalt production, yet most of its exports are in minimally refined forms. While copper is processed to 99.99 per cent purity locally, cobalt processing remains underdeveloped, with output typically reaching only 35 per cent purity. Recent initiatives, such as the agreement between DRC and Zambia to develop EV-battery value chains, highlight the potential of regional collaboration to scale local processing efforts. The partnership includes establishing the DRC–Zambia Battery Council, aligning policies and leveraging shared resources to build manufacturing capacity, create jobs and position both countries as key players in the global clean-energy transition.[23]

OPPORTUNITIES IN THE GLOBAL GREEN ECONOMY

As the world embraces green energy, the demand for battery metals is surging. African nations are uniquely positioned to meet this demand, but doing so requires an “Africa First” strategy that focuses on retaining more value within the continent. By developing local processing facilities for minerals such as cobalt and lithium, Africa can supply the global market with refined materials critical for EV batteries, solar panels and other green technologies. As highlighted by the African Development Bank at COP28, African leaders have a unique opportunity to attract global investments directly to the continent, accelerating decarbonisation and green-energy innovation without reliance on foreign aid and traditional investment from the US and China.[24]

Local processing could also support the production of battery precursors, creating local jobs and cultivating backward and forward linkages that stimulate the growth of related industries, such as chemicals. These developments would generate positive and immediate economic spillovers, driving industrialisation and strengthening Africa’s role in the global green economy while also building resilience against volatile commodity markets.

THE ROLE OF REGIONAL COOPERATION IN OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Achieving local beneficiation is not without challenges. Energy deficits, limited infrastructure and inadequate industrial capacity often hinder progress. For example:

- Zimbabwe faces a lack of reliable electricity and a weak industrial-chemical sector, making advanced lithium-refining difficult.
- DRC’s cobalt refineries require significant energy inputs, yet the country struggles with a 900MW electricity deficit for its mining industry.

Regional cooperation provides a practical pathway to overcoming these barriers. As the Lobito Corridor nears completion and competition for resources intensifies, African governments in the region have the opportunity to come together to link critical-mineral access to reciprocal investments in energy infrastructure.

The AfCFTA also offers a platform for integrating mining and refining operations across borders. For instance:

- The DRC and Zambia’s agreement to jointly develop EV-battery value chains showcases the benefits of pooling resources and sharing expertise. With other countries in the region, such as Malawi, prioritising mining as a means of economic development, regional collaboration will be key to unlocking this potential.
- Coordination through the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the African Minerals Development Centre can help standardise policies, reduce costs and strengthen bargaining power with external partners.

Africa’s critical minerals represent more than just economic potential; they are a cornerstone for achieving sustainable development and global competitiveness. By refining and manufacturing resources locally, Africa can position itself as a leader in the green economy, driving long-term prosperity across the continent.

Investing in Talent Development

African nations can also harness their human capital to drive transformative growth. Africa is the youngest continent globally; in 2020 its population had a median age of 19.7, compared with 31.0 in Latin America and the Caribbean, 32.0 in Asia, 33.4 in Oceania, 38.6 in Northern America and 42.5 in Europe.[25] By equipping this dynamic and youthful population with skills in areas such as AI, machine learning, cyber-security and software development, African countries can build robust digital economies that enhance self-reliance, fuel innovation and unlock the continent’s vast economic potential. This is backed by a recent survey that shows that 75 per cent of young Africans intend to start a business within five years, with 80 per cent of African entrepreneurs relying on digital products and technologies to drive success.[26]

There are already important steps being taken in this direction. The African Union’s Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy underlines the critical role of AI in transforming Africa’s health-care, agriculture and education sectors while creating jobs and driving socioeconomic development.[27]

Collaborating with global educational institutions and technology companies can fast-track the adoption of AI and its benefits. TBI’s recommendations for compute ecosystems emphasise the importance of public-private partnerships in training local talent in advanced computing and establishing cutting-edge programmes to prepare Africa’s workforce for a modern digital economy. Similarly, the partnership between the AfDB and Intel to train 3 million Africans in Fourth-Industrial-Revolution skills highlights the continent’s commitment to equipping its workforce for the future.[28]

Once again, an “Africa First” strategy that promotes regional collaboration is pivotal in addressing skill gaps and building a resilient talent pool. African governments can amplify the impact of their individual efforts by:

- Creating regional frameworks: Initiatives such as the AfCFTA and TWIN provide a platform for harmonising digital-training policies and integrating talent development across borders.
- Sharing knowledge: Establishing a regional consortium for compute capacity, modelled on the EU’s European High Performance Computing Joint Undertaking, could enable African nations to pool resources for talent development in high-demand fields such as quantum computing and data analytics.

Such cooperation encourages cross-border innovation and ensures a cohesive approach to talent development, strengthening Africa’s collective position in the global digital economy.

05 Towards a Reimagined US-Africa Relationship

President Trump's "America First" approach may introduce challenges for Africa, particularly in navigating shifts in US priorities and reduced multilateral engagement. However, the "Africa First" strategy outlined in this paper offers the continent a powerful framework to drive its own growth and resilience in ways that reflect Africa's unique needs and aspirations. This approach is not inherently contradictory to President Trump's transactional style, as it emphasises agency and ownership – values that align with his preference for self-reliance and mutual benefit. By supporting an "Africa First" strategy, the US has an opportunity to build equitable partnerships that respect African leadership and priorities, offering a pathway to reframe US-Africa relations around shared interests and mutual benefits.

President Trump's second term presents opportunities for US-Africa relations. The prevailing geopolitics have fundamentally shifted since his first term, with an intensified rivalry between the US and China – particularly in the Global South – as well as the fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the emergence of the Gulf States with interests in the Horn of Africa, and a global technology race to dominate AI and secure data sovereignty. Africa's geopolitical importance is rising, positioning the continent at the centre of many global shifts. President Trump may surprise the international community by departing from his first-term approach and instead pay greater attention to Africa to advance his global strategic interests. This could serve as an important counterweight to China's dominance on Africa's path to economic development but must fit within an "Africa First" policy framework.

Countering China's Influence

Countries in Africa are rich in critical minerals and rare-earth material crucial for technologies for renewable energy. In 2020, China imported about a third of Africa's minerals and metals exports, worth $16.6 billion. This represented an increase of 28 per cent from 2018.[29] This reliance highlights the importance of Africa in the global energy transition and presents an opportunity for African nations to leverage these resources for greater economic benefits.

Mineral-rich countries including South Africa, Angola, DRC, Congo and Zambia have the potential to diversify their supply chains by fostering partnerships with the US, reducing over-reliance on China. President Trump's administration has an opportunity to capitalise on this by advancing US economic and strategic interests, but with the future of Prosper Africa and the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) unclear, the trajectory of US-Africa investment initiatives remains uncertain. These initiatives, championed during President Trump's first term, could play expanded roles in supporting US businesses investing in Africa, particularly in critical sectors such as mineral value chains and energy infrastructure. Whether they will be restructured, replaced or quietly sidelined is yet to be seen, but their fate will be critical in shaping Washington's long-term economic engagement with the continent.

The US-Zambia-DRC tripartite memorandum of understanding on developing EV-battery value chains offers a strong blueprint for how a partnership could work, but success will depend on effective implementation by all parties and a strong commitment from the US. Such a move would not only secure a market for US solar, wind and other clean-energy technologies but – as highlighted in a recent US Institute of Peace report[30] – would reduce US reliance on China for renewable-energy components and technologies while bolstering national security and advancing foreign-policy interests.

Reframing Relations and the Case for AGOA 2.0

Whether the US reduces its engagement with Africa or deepens its involvement to advance strategic interests, it is imperative that any engagement occurs on African terms, driven by African leadership. An "Africa First" policy positions African nations as equal partners, ensuring that relationships are guided by African-driven priorities rather than external agendas. This approach seeks to redefine partnerships by promoting African agency in shaping economic policies, governance reforms and development trajectories. It rejects the paternalistic dynamics – or even “benign neglect”[31] – that have historically characterised US-Africa relations and advocates for partnerships built on mutual respect, shared values and a recognition of Africa’s strategic significance in the global economy.

This recalibration of US-Africa relations can establish a partnership based on reciprocity and long-term collaboration. African nations, leveraging their growing strategic importance, can negotiate terms that prioritise localised economic growth. A key element of this recalibration should include a revamped AGOA (AGOA 2.0), which could further align the US with Africa’s economic transformation. Expanding AGOA to incentivise value addition, promote regional supply chains and integrate African economies into US industrial strategies would strengthen both US-Africa relations and African self-reliance. AGOA 2.0 could focus on sectors such as renewable energy, advanced manufacturing and digital technology, creating opportunities for mutually beneficial growth. AI can also play a pivotal role in this effort to accelerate the move from aid to trade. It can enable US investors to identify market trends, improve supply-chain transparency and deliver more efficient logistics for US-Africa trade.[32]

Reframing US-Africa relations is not just an adjustment of policy but a redefinition of the relationship itself. For African policymakers, this is an opportunity to assert sovereignty, prioritise aspirations and ensure that any external partnerships align with Africa’s long-term vision. For the US, supporting an “Africa First” strategy aligns with its broader goals of fostering stability, advancing economic interests and countering rival powers such as China. By investing in African-led initiatives, promoting trade integration and supporting local value addition, the US can position itself as a partner in Africa’s transformation while benefiting from a stronger and more self-reliant continent.

06

Conclusion

The future of US-Africa relations under a renewed “America First” policy brings both challenges and opportunities for the African continent. While the prospect of reduced US engagement presents risks, it also emphasises the urgency of Africa embracing an “Africa First” approach. By leveraging its vast resources, youthful population and growing geopolitical importance, Africa has the chance to reshape its developmental trajectory on its own terms.

Central to this shift is the need for African policymakers to assert agency, building partnerships that prioritise regional integration and innovation. Some of the foundations for an “Africa First” era are already in place, with initiatives like the AfCFTA and platforms such as TWIN driving economic integration, offering the potential to boost GDP and mitigating the impact of reduced foreign aid.

Meanwhile, Africa’s youthful population and abundant critical minerals provide a unique opportunity to lead in the technological and green revolutions. By investing in skills-development and innovation, the continent can transform its demographic advantage into economic growth. Harnessing critical minerals for local value addition can drive industrialisation, create jobs and position Africa as a key player in the global green economy.

At the same time, the US can support an “Africa First” strategy by entering into partnerships that prioritise African agency, economic self-reliance and sustainable development. This alignment not only advances Africa’s integration and progress but also fits squarely with US interests by promoting stable, prosperous and reliable partners in a competitive global landscape.

As they look to a shifting geopolitical landscape, the task ahead for African leaders is to transform external partnerships into vehicles that amplify Africa’s agency and address its unique challenges. Whether negotiating terms on trade, climate resilience or technological advances, Africa’s leaders must ensure that these partnerships strengthen governance, promote inclusive economic development and build resilient institutions. The stakes are high, but with strong leadership and a clear strategy, Africa can navigate this period of uncertainty to strengthen its global influence and secure a future defined by progress and self-reliance.

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