

# The Strategic Importance of Africa

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The United States' ambivalence toward Africa is causing it to lose momentum in competition with both China and Russia. To reverse this trend the U.S. must re-imagine how it views both the nature of competition and the value of Africa.

## The game has changed

Over the past several decades, [the character of war—and competition—have changed](#). By observing the U.S. military's domination in both Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom, the United States' adversaries learned that direct military competition with the U.S. is costly and counterproductive. Additionally, the proliferation of technology lowered barriers for both state and non-state actors to impose costs on the United States. As a result, the United States' adversaries developed asymmetric ways to compete—employing [high-tech, low cost technologies](#) capable of holding U.S. strategic interests at risk while leveraging [economic influence](#), [political subversion](#), and a willingness to [flout international norms](#) to undermine U.S. interests.

In this strategic environment, traditional military power is less useful than in the past. Today, the United States' conventional and nuclear overmatch drives adversaries away from the very conflict for which its military was built. Instead of meeting the U.S. head-on, Russia and China adopted [Sun Tzu's](#) admonition, “military dispositions take form like water... war has no constant dynamic, water has no constant form.” General Dunford, the 19<sup>th</sup> Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, had a slightly less elegant way of describing it—[“adversarial competition below the threshold of traditional armed conflict.”](#) Either way, the outcome is the same: Russia and China are flowing like water, away from U.S. strengths and toward its weaknesses—seizing political, economic, and [military initiative](#).

## The epicenter of the new game is Africa

Few places provide a more pronounced example of this new form of competition than the continent of Africa. While the U.S. fixates on the Russian military threat in Eastern Europe and Chinese expansionism in the Pacific—looking to blunt its competitors' ambitions through traditional military deterrence—Russia and China are out-competing the U.S. in Africa in ways that have the potential to fundamentally alter the global balance of power.

For the past century, the United States, and the west in general, [viewed Africa as a problem to be managed](#). Despite promising economic and demographic trends on the continent, the U.S. hasn't changed its historic perception—still viewing Africa with a sort of strategic “white man's burden.” [Its competitors don't share this conception of Africa.](#)

Instead of a problem to be solved, China and Russia view Africa as an opportunity to be seized. From 2007-2017, [U.S. trade with Africa dropped by 54% while China's grew by 220%](#). While Russia's total investment in Africa pales in comparison to the U.S. and China, it's growing—[by 40% since 2015](#). In 2019, Russia held the first-ever Russia-Africa summit—hosting 45 African heads of state. China holds a similar event called the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation. The U.S. hosts no such initiative.

In 2017, China opened its [first permanent military presence](#) outside of the South China Sea, in Djibouti. In a savvy soft-power move, China launched a 2015 initiative to put satellite televisions in 10,000 African villages. No surprise—the television sets come with free, pre-loaded access to Chinese stations, [pumping state-sponsored content](#) into homes across the continent. Today, Russia embeds [a former intelligence agent](#) as a senior defense advisor in the Central African Republic, employs the Wagner Group in Libya and elsewhere, and owns deals with seven sub-Saharan countries to [build their nuclear energy infrastructure](#).

Each competitor’s strategy has its flaws—but the contrast between their commitment to the continent and the U.S.’s is stark. This juxtaposition led CSIS to [conclude](#) that “the U.S. is paradoxically stepping away from the region while the rest the world is leaning in.” As a result, Russia and China are getting in on the ground floor of what [The Economist](#) calls, “[the African Century](#)”—securing access and influence to the resources, geography, and relationships that will shape the next 100 years of global power competition.

### **Change how the U.S. views Africa**

To compete globally—both now and in the future—the U.S. must fundamentally recast its approach to Africa.

A new U.S. approach to Africa starts with a new mindset. While there is tremendous human need on the continent, [seven of the 10 fastest growing economies in the world are in Africa](#). Thirty-four countries, home to 72 percent of Africa’s citizens, [improved their governance performance](#) over the past decade. Banking, production of raw material, and basic manufacturing, which account for 40% of Africa’s GDP, are [slowly but surely transitioning to African-owned](#) and African-run enterprises. None of these trends mean change will come fast or steadily. Therefore, a new U.S. mindset for Africa must focus—politically, economically, and militarily—on fostering long-term change.

Rejecting a positive view of Africa’s trajectory does not lessen the continent’s importance. In the next 35 years, [Africa’s population is expected to double](#)—comprising nearly [30% of the world’s population by 2050](#). By 2025, an additional 90 million African households will enter the consumer class—[contributing a purchasing power of \\$2.1 trillion](#) to the global economy. International routes into the Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Indian Oceans pass through African waters—affecting four of the U.S. military’s Geographic Combatant Commands. And, as the cost of labor in China increases, Africa—with the world’s largest labor pool—will likely become the [world’s next epicenter of manufacturing](#).

The truth is, Africa will play a central role in the next century whether the U.S. likes it or not.

### **Change how the U.S. approaches Africa**

To account for this reality, the U.S. needs to develop a coherent, compelling, and competitive strategy to regain initiative in great power competition—both in Africa and around the globe—securing a relative advantage for years to come.

Economically, the U.S. must double-down on its economic engagement with African countries. This requires a willing private sector and U.S. policies that buttress American companies in these emerging markets. Diplomatically, it requires the U.S. to think creatively and accept risk by securing long-term commitments with key Africa partners. Militarily, the U.S. must reexamine fundamental assumptions about how forces are apportioned around the globe. The U.S. currently has [70,000 troops](#) permanently stationed in Europe—and another 6,000 who rotate in each year. By diverting some of these forces to missions in Africa, the Department of Defense may just get a better return on its investment—both for readiness and competition—while compelling its Allies to increase burden sharing in Europe.

As the U.S. adapts its approach in Africa, it must unite its diplomatic, economic, and military power—the three are inextricably linked and absolutely essential to long-term success in Africa. Our competitors understand this. Today, China funds or operates [nearly one in five ports](#) in sub-Saharan Africa—providing them economic, diplomatic, and even military clout (see Djibouti example). China’s approach is nothing new. For 95 years, the U.S. underwrote the construction, operation, and security of the Panama Canal—giving it similar regional and global clout as to what China has in Africa today. It’s time for the United States to dust off that old playbook and look for ways to layer the effects of all elements of national power in Africa.

Finally, the U.S. must promote the importance of Africa in its public consciousness. This is not a hand wave suggestion. Through diplomatic efforts, promotion of African owned business, portrayals of Africans in media, increased education visas, and favored immigration status, the U.S. can begin to view Africa (and Africans) as worthy peers in building the next century.

### **Conclusion: admit you have a problem**

The first step in solving a problem is admitting you have one. The U.S. is being outcompeted in a region of the world that will define the next century. To solve the problem, the U.S. must change *how* it competes. Blunt force deterrence must be replaced by more subtle, indirect ways of gaining advantage. And, the U.S. must change *where* it competes. Russia and China have fixed the U.S. in Europe and Asia—key areas for competition over the past century, while they make inroads in Africa—the site of competition for the next century.