

## Research Article

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# An Evaluation of the US Relations with Sub-Saharan Africa in The 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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**Abstract:** This study assesses the viability of relations between the US and sub-Saharan Africa by examining the trends of their political and economic cooperation. Given the high number of member states involved in this partnership, a strong alliance could influence good governance practices beyond their continents. The gist of their relationship challenges lies in claims by sub-Saharan states that the partnership is one-sided in favour of the US, turning the enterprise into a zero-sum game. For instance, the US insist on their partners to meet thresholds of ‘good governance practices’ as determined by the US itself. However, governance breaches are revealed from both sides. Data for this study were gathered from secondary and primary sources. The study concludes that the relationship is lukewarm due to mistrust, and this has led to the unsuccessful US involvement in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Keywords:** Climate change; Economic diplomacy; International Criminal Court; War on terror; Trade agreements.

## 1 Introduction

This paper explores the political trajectory of relations between the US and sub-Saharan Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Modern politics is increasingly being defined by debates on democracy, human rights, and good governance. In this context, the importance of strengthened ties between the US and sub-Saharan Africa is crucial to the realization of good governance practices beyond their continents (Cornelissen et al, 2012). Samuel Huntington described the period after the end of the Cold War in 1990 as the third wave of democratisation. This meant that liberal democracy became the ideological justification for legitimisation of states. However, since then, the liberal philosophy has not been free from controversies both from the practical point of view as well as from the theoretical perspective due to competing interests (Huntington, 1991).

After the end of the Cold War, American identities in sub-Saharan Africa became more associated with the concept of modernity through emulation of US technological innovation (Westad, 2007). An interviewee of this study, Merera Gudina explains that:

...during the early 1990s, the main relations between the US and sub-Saharan Africa were centred on the Washington Consensus policies and International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans focused on Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP). These programs were offered on condition that recipient sub-Saharan states agreed to champion the free market ideology. However, by the dawn of the new millennium, the results of the SAPs did not make a real impact in the economies of the sub-Saharan states. Contrary to expectations of economic boom, majority of states that adopted SAPs arguably experienced more economic hardships. The failure of SAPs therefore, began to reinforce the view that the US was wittingly setting up forms of booby traps against sub-Saharan Africa, i.e., profiteering from loans which in the first place could not produce tangible economic dividends for the local population...

(Personal Interview, 23 December, 2019).

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In the area of trade, there has not been any significant Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from the US from the year 2000 to date, partly because of the trade conditionalities which require that sub-Saharan African states meet a threshold of good governance practices.

In the area of security cooperation, another interviewee of this study, Kefale Beyazen argues that:

... the events surrounding the 1994 Rwanda genocide provided a template of what the US relations with sub-Saharan Africa would be in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: the absence of active US involvement to stop or minimise the impact of the genocide left simmering distaste of US foreign policy in the region...

(Personal Interview, 14 February 2020).

The alternative to the US failure could have come from the former colonial power France – but France equally failed to rise to the occasion in spite of its influence and capacity (Ntreh, 2021). On the flip side of the coin, it can be argued that the US reluctance in Rwanda may have been caused by the trauma of the 1993 infamous battle of Mogadishu where 18 US marines were massacred by al-Qaeda affiliated Somali militants. These events forced the US to withdrawal from Somalia (Beyazen, 2020).

In broad terms, the turn of the millennium came with a US security cooperation policy that was reluctant to get involved in military operations in the sub-Saharan region. The US seemed only focused in places where its vital interests were at stake. Beyazen (2020) opines that:

“this selective approach to security issues may have unwittingly aided the growth of terror cells across the sub-Saharan region since US intervention was not to be expected.”

The most notable terrorist groups that have emerged in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are: Boko Haram (Nigeria), Seleka (Central African Republic), al-Shabaab (Somalia), al-Qaeda (Sudan, Kenya), Islamic State (Mali, Chad and now in Mozambique). The factors connected to the current Mozambique insurgencies provide a telling proposition on local grievances: frustrations over high poverty levels and lack of access to land have been exacerbated by multinational corporations whom locals accuse of exploring natural gas reserves at their expense. Similar grievances have been expressed by local people in the oil-rich Delta region of Nigeria. Strategic thinkers however, opine that the Mozambique troubles are a well orchestrated plan by multinationals and other foreign interests to destabilise the country. These entities exploit the volatile environment to extract natural gas and mineral resources without remitting their tax obligations (Giles and Mwai, 2021).

Without US active intervention in these insurgency hotspots, the impression in sub-Saharan Africa is that the US is in fact part of the creation of these problems. Much more concerning is the deep-rooted perception by sub-Saharan states that the US is only focused on profiteering from their relations at the least cost possible (Gudina, 2019). Terror threats in sub-Saharan region are not necessarily new: the earliest warning signs manifested in 1998 when al-Qaeda affiliated militants bombed the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (Mlula et al. 2015). So, the underlying causes of terror activities in sub-Saharan region are well known by the US and yet they have not received due attention. Mlula (2015) posit that terrorism in sub-Saharan Africa is propelled mainly by entrenched poverty arising from mineral and oil exploration by multinationals-many of whom are affiliated to the US. The spill-over effects of conflicts from failed states then lead to increased social-economic disparities which fuel discontent especially among the youths. In addition to this challenge, there are also other external forces driven by religious fanaticism who exploit these economic performance weaknesses and use them as a trojan horse to mobilize and spread jihadism and radical Islam.

Most importantly, the sub-Saharan region views the US as the brainchild of the globalization agenda which has today left more people of sub-Saharan Africa marginalized. Inequalities created by neo-liberal capitalism (led by the US) in form of unfair corporate trade practices, pollution from mining industries, non-adherence to the United Nations (UN) greenhouse emission thresholds and dumping of technological and industrial waste in poor countries have exposed the dark side of globalization (Ibrahim, 2013). From this narrative, it can be deduced that one of the major criticisms of the US hegemonic power lies precisely in its purported strength: that there is no country or organisation that can check its excesses or audit its deviations from good governance practices and hold it to account (Moyo, 2018). The lukewarm relationship between the US and sub-Saharan Africa may be exploited by China which is eager to support sub-Saharan states in various developmental areas through FDI (Moyo, 2011). China after all, represents many modern values that the US also adores such as a disciplined work-culture, technological innovation, creativity and industrial organisation (Westad, 2007). Moyo (2011) suggests that the alternative relationship for sub-Saharan Africa could be cultivated

with the former colonial powers (Britain and France) but the relations with them are equally lukewarm because their approach to harnessing African international relations is not different from that of the US.

## 2 Methodology

The research question for this study was focused on examining the lukewarm relationship between the US and sub-Saharan Africa and to explore the causal factors that have led to the unsuccessful US involvement in sub-Saharan region. It is argued that the significance of a stronger partnership could increase chances of consolidating democracy and good governance practices in sub-Saharan Africa. In discussing the issues enunciated, this study adopted a qualitative methodology with the collection of primary data through interviews with experts in international relations evaluations and also builds on secondary sources through academic journals, scholarly books, and online newspaper articles. The literature is centred on economic diplomacy and good governance practices in international relations between the US and sub-Saharan Africa. The study is focused on observable political phenomenon among sub-Saharan states and the US in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## 3 US Foreign Policy on Sub-Saharan Africa

9/11 fundamentally changed the US security focus on sub-Saharan Africa. While in the past the sub-Saharan region was viewed mainly from the prism of humanitarian attention, it gained prominence as a national security interest for the US (Da Cruz and Stephens, 2010). However, the main source of relationship between the US and sub-Saharan Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has been in form of aid to the health and community development sectors. The impact of this relationship was at its peak during the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations. Although aid has continued to flow, it is generally perceived by sub-Saharan states to be ‘half-hearted assistance’, or assistance wrapped up in barbed wire (Barya, 2009).

The first indication of poor relations manifested when sub-Saharan states refused a US request in 2007 to set up a military base for the US-Africa Command AFRICOM (Malan, 2007). While the US hoped to improve its stained image of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century with sub-Saharan Africa through the presence of AFRICOM, the Africans on the other hand saw it as a ‘new scramble for African oil and minerals’. Critically, the failure by the US to first consult with the African Union (AU) made African states wary about AFRICOM’s real motives (Deen, 2013). Liberia and Ethiopia who were pro-AFRICOM argued that although the command was going to serve US interests, those interests often overlapped with the welfare needs of sub-Saharan states (Da Cruz and Stephenson, 2010). The majority of sub-Saharan states however, could not buy into the terror doctrine argument and insisted that AFRICOM was simply a cover to infiltrate the region (Malan, 2007). So, the refusal was a draw back for the US in its crusade on the war on terror considering that intervention still plays a key role in its foreign policy of reconstruction of the world order. The war on terror itself is a controversial subject in sub-Saharan Africa in many aspects. For instance, approximately 30% of the total population of the region is made up of Muslims (Pew Research Centre, 2020). Given that majority of the US’s terror targets are of Islamic faith, the strategy to intensify this fight is viewed negatively by African Muslims who consider this to be a fight against their own ‘brothers in faith’. Influential regional bodies such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) including the countries of the Sahel region totally rejected the idea of AFRICOM (Malan, 2007). They argued that AFRICOM could be a conduit and part of a broader US agenda to further its foreign policy in sub-Saharan Africa (Da Cruz and Stephens, 2010). It was contended that if implemented, such a military base would be a betrayal to the cause of pan-Africanism which seeks to eradicate all nuanced forms of neo-colonial and imperialism (African Charter, 1981). Sub-Saharan states view AFRICOM as a secretive institution whose main agenda remains unclear – in fact, many suspect it to be a camouflage meant to protect US oil interests and contain the burgeoning Chinese influence in the region (Hofstedt, 2012).

Sub-Saharan states also argued that an increased militarisation of US foreign policy would be counterproductive in the sense that it would undermine efforts towards democratisation and would instead encourage and entrench authoritarian practices in Africa (Deen, 2013). Historically, the US has - through its containment policy - rendered support

to despots and also provided funding to some rebel groups, yet has been reluctant to support liberation movements (Deen, 2013). Recent political developments in the Horn of Africa confirm the sub-Saharan fears of more US ominous motives at play: the US currently is collaborating with Ethiopia and providing it with material support to fight militias associated with al-Shabaab in neighbouring Somalia – this cooperation is in spite of Ethiopia's poor record on human rights, i.e., the muzzling of freedom of expression and intolerance to dissenting voices (Deen, 2013).

Further, the US apparent silence on an autocratic government in Equatorial Guinea and muteness on questionable polls in Nigeria and Angola can only be attributed to the US oil interests in those countries (Deen, 2013). Africans have pointed out that the solution to combat terrorism lies in addressing the root causes which are inextricably bound with other sources of conflicts such as poverty, historical grievances, and improving economic conditions of the population. These deep-rooted human security challenges are the main causes of terrorism, and as such, resultant conflicts cannot simply be resolved by resorting to military action (Chauzal and van Damme, 2015). The suspicion and fear surrounding AFRICOM was proven to be correct when AFRICOM (along with NATO) could not consult with the AU before launching an assault on Libya in 2011. The removal of the Gadhafi regime in Libya and Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003 by the US led military coalitions on accusations related to terrorist activities testifies to this. Although both regimes were dictatorships, they managed to provide relative state stability of their countries (Stevenson, 2011). The security situation which the US claimed it would provide after the fall of the two regimes has proved to be a pipe dream. Today, both Libya and Iraq have joined the list of failed states and are now fertile grounds for additional terror cells, which means that there is more insecurity today than there was before the fall of the two regimes. In this context, sub-Saharan Africans see the US as a marauding superpower that cannot be trusted with military power (Sherry, 2005). After the fall of the Gadhafi regime, some of his combatants fled with weapons to neighbouring Mali where they joined forces with local militias and are now causing insurgency mayhem in northern Mali (Asare, 2012).

Some analysts however, argue that the rise of terrorism in sub-Saharan Africa may in fact be attributed to the failure of AFRICOM.

Another project of concern to sub-Saharan states relates to the US Trade Act, which the US initiated in 2000, the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). This Act is viewed by most sub-Saharan states as a poor diplomatic initiative because so far, very little investment has come to the region (Stiglitz, 2019). AGOA failed mainly on two accounts: (1) it was a one-way trade deal which only allowed imports to the US, and those imports were generally obtained at an undercutting price to the detriment of the sub-Saharan states; (2) the US favoured bilateral deals over multilateral deals- this was deeply unappealing to sub-Saharan states. Bilateral treaties favour stronger countries, in the sense that the US can easily bully smaller partners into making undue concessions. This pattern of unfair trading systems can be traced back to the Bretton Woods system which was set up after World War II and designed mainly to serve the interests of advanced capitalist societies (Gudina, 2019). Jeffrey Sachs, a professor of international trade at Harvard disapproves the US bilateral trade system with sub-Saharan states. He points out that the US aid funds should be channelled through regional organisations such as SADC or ECOWAS for two reasons: (1) to symbolise commitment to the sub-Saharan region as a whole, as opposed to bilateralism (which does not help to stimulate regional growth) in the same way that the US has got missions to the EU; (2) regional missions would generally strengthen the US appeal in sub-Saharan Africa and would therefore avoid US aid withdrawals from individual countries, thereby encouraging more cohesion since the stakes would be much higher (Dunn and Shaw, 2001).

More FDI are needed if sub-Saharan Africa is to create a greater export base for its products to help alleviate poverty of the millions of its people. Majority of sub-Saharan states reject what they consider to be a one-sided development programme designed only to promote American business interests in the region. The lack of tangible US investments has seemed to create an environment that allows sub-Saharan Africa to look to China and the EU for more FDI (Moyo, 2018). It is argued that sub-Saharan states may be attracted to China because the value-orientation between the US and China differs fundamentally: whereas China does not interfere in recipients' domestic affairs, the US emphasize on the promotion of democratic values as a prerequisite to recipients (Moyo, 2018). The Statista Report (2020) indicate that between 2014 and 2018, China's FDI to Africa was the highest at 16% of its total foreign investments compared to 8% from the US and 13% from the EU (Statista Report, 2020). Overall, Chinese trade with sub-Saharan Africa has surpassed that of the US; having grown from US\$ 3 billion in 1995 to over US\$100 billion in 2008 (Deen, 2013).

Merera Gudina further explains that:

...the US commitment to sub-Saharan Africa remains largely questionable. For instance, the SAP which were championed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank have so far proved futile for sub-Saharan Africa. The SAP which the US propagated for sub-Saharan Africa 'is a very bad doctor who prescribes the same medicine for all diseases'. A historic pattern shows that the interests of the US come first and as such, Americans are only committed to projects that are in line with their national interest...

(Personal Interview, 23 December 2019).

Stiglitz (2019) points out that the US led neo-liberal policy of unregulated markets which propagated the theory that, 'a rising tide lifts all boats' has proved to be bankrupt and few people would disagree with the assertion that the liberal agenda's initial appeal no longer hold much sway. Poor market regulation and poor risk asset management seem to have been the hallmarks of the last 30 years of liberal policies: the 2008 world economic crunch proves this point. Also, the stepping back from liberal policies by two of the world's leading proponents of global governance, i.e., the US through identity politics, and the UK through Brexit, testifies to the failure of the liberal paradigm of an unregulated free market system (Stiglitz, 2019). In addition, the US local politics seem to be turning inward as politicians from both sides of the isle have become more protectionists than ever before. This in-house fighting may also have contributed to the disorientation of the US foreign policy on sub-Saharan Africa.

## 4 Critique of The US Harnessing of African International Relations

Incidences where the US has seemed to show a lack of leadership on good governance practices through some of its arbitrary global policies may also have contributed to the poor relations with sub-Saharan Africa as both parties have tended to engage in blame-games. For instance, the US disregard of the 1997 Kyoto protocol and the renunciation of the Paris Climate treaty in 2017 are some of the actions that have not advanced the political and economic cohesion with sub-Saharan Africa. Given that the US contributes substantially to global emissions, that alone should have been a compelling reason for the US to adhere to the UN greenhouse emissions threshold (Nwankwo, 2019). Another interviewee of this study, Yechale Asmamaw argues that:

"climate change affects ecological patterns that may create conflicts in certain areas as was the case in the Darfur region of Sudan where conflicts arose over scarcity of pastoral land and degenerated into genocide" (Personal Interview, 24 January 2020).

The non-adherence to international treaties and norms confirms a US historic pattern of self-centredness; of pursuing national interest ideologies at the expense of other states. Sub-Saharan Africa has called on the US to scale down its emissions as the impact of climate change is felt much more by people of the global south than those of the global north. Effects of climate change include acid rain, global warming, and biodiversity loss (Dunn and Shaw, 2001).

So, climate change issues have come to shape sub-Saharan African orientation to global governance with demands for more equitable inclusion in multilateral structures. The 2009 Algiers Declaration forum on climate change (the African Common Platform to Copenhagen), formed a solid framework for subsequent sub-Saharan African claims on environmental issues (UN Economic Commission for Africa, 2010). Former Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi made compelling pronouncements regarding the collective position of the sub-Saharan African states by declaring that:

...we (the Africans) will never accept any global deal that does not limit global warming to the minimum unavoidable level, no matter what levels of compensation and assistance are promised to us...while we will reason with everyone to achieve our objective, we will not rubberstamp an agreement by the powers that be as the best we could get for the moment. We will use our numbers to delegitimise any agreement that is not consistent with our minimal position. If needs be, we are prepared to walk out of any negotiations that threaten to be another rape of our continent... (UN Economic Commission for Africa Report, 2010).

This shows that stronger African claims for environmental justice should not be underplayed. Furthermore, the Economic Commission of Africa (2010) asserts that in many instances, sub-Saharan states feel that stronger nations led by the US are deliberately creating an international system that favour powerful states. This observation means that human security should be a collective endeavour with active participation from all stakeholders. Wheeler (2000) cautions that the spill-over effects of human insecurity could manifest in various forms such as population



displacements, consequently causing refugee crises. This in turn would require humanitarian intervention assistance. The prospect of such interventions underscores the need for the US to play a more proactive role in ensuring that these crises are avoided in the first place, after all, when push comes to shove, humanitarian crises are usually a burden left to be resolved by powerful states since they are assumed to have a higher capacity of resource mobilisation (*ibid*). In the long term, the spill-over effects become ever more entrenched and start producing zero-sum games, whereby success in one state is only achieved at the expense of the neighbouring state(s). The final end product are recurrent and endless conflicts (Kieh, 2009).

Other actions by the US that have brought discontent in sub-Saharan Africa include the refusal in 2018 by the US to cooperate with the International Criminal Court (ICC) on allegations of war crimes that may have been committed by US troops in Afghanistan (*Conflict Zone Program*, 3 April 2019). The US had threatened the ICC judges with US travel bans including financial sanctions if they went ahead with the investigations. The US went a step further in their warnings: that ICC officials could face prosecution in the US criminal system and that any company or state that would assist an ICC investigation of Americans would also suffer similar consequences. These remarks come across as a mockery on human rights accountability. The ICC immediate past president Eboe-Osuji's interview revealed the disparaging remarks that John Bolton, the former US National Security Advisor made against the ICC on 10th September 2018. Bolton said:

...we will not cooperate with the ICC, we will provide no assistance to the ICC, we will not join the ICC, we will let the ICC die on its own, after all, to all intents and purposes, the ICC is already dead to us (*Conflict Zone Program*, 3 April 2019).

In these circumstances, Hoile (2010) points out that smaller states that find themselves at loggerheads with the US cannot expect to get protection from the UN since the US is among the most prominent members of the UN Security Council with a veto power.

Another interviewee of this study, Eddy Maloka argues that:

...due to the disparities in the dispensation of international justice, most sub-Saharan African states have accused the ICC of double standards by applying selective justice through the singling out of weaker states, most notably, the African states, and ignoring abuses elsewhere. These actions have not only polarised international opinion on the ICC between Western powers and sub-Saharan Africa but have in effect seemed to grant de facto immunity to human rights abusers in the West...

(Personal Interview, 4 February 2020).

Human rights organizations have cautioned that by assailing international institutions such as the ICC without putting in place an effective alternative, the US is implicitly redeeming African tyrants and hence weakening the capacity of the international system to constrain the behaviour of authoritarian regimes in the sub-Saharan region (Human Rights Watch, 2016). The lack of respect for international organisations and treaties by the US has contributed to the diminished role of the UN. This has worked to the detriment of sub-Saharan states because, by extension, the efficacy of their own continental body (the AU) is also weakened since the AU itself looks up to the UN for broader leadership (UN Economic Commission for Africa, 2010).

The US weaknesses can also be shown on the way they engage with sub-Saharan Africa on continental development: the US and its European allies rely much more on aid packages rather than on FDI. This approach tends to create a 'master-servant' relationship as opposed to the Chinese approach which focuses on FDI as the main driver of its relationship with sub-Saharan Africa which creates a form of 'equal partnership' relationship (Moyo, 2018). Trade agreements with the US are also suspect: for instance, in February 2021, Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo announced that his country would no longer continue the cocoa trade with Switzerland, citing unbalanced trade returns (Ntreh, 2021). In 2020, Ivory Coast and Ghana put a temporary freeze on the export of cocoa to the US, citing unfair trade pricing which arbitrarily lowered African net profits. The seeming continued belittling of sub-Saharan African trade policies shows that the US does not fully acknowledge the fact that African initiatives can also lend important contributions in international affairs (Ntreh, 2021).

Further, the US proposition that has tended to see every conflict in sub-Saharan Africa as requiring a military solution instead of studying the underlying causes of local grievances has weakened its appeal in the region. In this context, Africans perceive the US to be a war mongering superpower. This perception is increasingly prompting the

consolidation of Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS) whose capability in the long-term could provide considerable odds to the US hegemony in sub-Saharan Africa (Zakaria, 2009).

Moyo (2011) argues that most of the US foreign policies seem to be self-centred and woven in what appears to be only in US national interest regardless of the negative outcomes elsewhere – these actions work at cross purposes with the US's own policy objective of creating a harmonious global world. In the absence of sufficient incentives, sub-Saharan Africa will look elsewhere for more investments for its growing population. This is where China comes into the equation to complete the missing link. The idea by some analysts that things will return to 'normal' i.e., the US reclaiming its hegemonic position at some future point may seem too optimistic; the world is fast moving on (Stiglitz, 2019). In these circumstances, China seems to have exploited this weakness in the relations between the US and sub-Saharan Africa by aggressively penetrating the region's market through Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and flexible loan regimes that surpass current US offers (Jacques, 2015).

## 5 Critique of Sub-Saharan African Governance Practices

The poor record on good governance practices in sub-Saharan Africa has meant that it has opened itself up to criticism and potential interventionist systems from outside. It can be argued that in the absence of a world government, the great powers through the UN Security Council have a greater responsibility to maintain constitutive values in IR as was witnessed for instance, through US pre-emptive and preventative military actions against Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011 (UN Charter, Article 24/25/26, 1945).

In circumstances of gross human rights abuses, the US, given its standing in the UN Security Council may be justified to intervene as part of 'Responsibility to Protect' (UN Charter, 1945). In 2012, former US president Barack Obama warned that the US would not stand by idly when sub-Saharan African politicians threaten legitimately elected governments or attempt to circumvent the integrity of democratic processes. Due to lack of good governance practices, several sub-Saharan states are currently facing US sanctions; Zimbabwe, DR Congo, Guinea, Sudan, Somalia, Burundi, Central African Republic and Congo Brazzaville are current offenders (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019).

The excuses of the sub-Saharan African lack of good governance practices are often conveniently blamed on the inherited colonial governance structures. Blaming colonialists will give sub-Saharan states someone to point a finger at but it does not solve the challenges that the region faces today. The region needs to focus on solutions, and not to dwell on the past. It would be unwise to attribute African challenges solely to the history of slavery and colonialism. The weakness of the colonial narrative is that it tends to eliminate African agency and responsibility considering that most sub-Saharan states have been independent for over 50 years now (Mills, 2010).

When delivering the 17<sup>th</sup> annual Nelson Mandela lecture in November 2019, the former Chief Justice of South Africa Thomas R. Mogoeng acknowledged that the sub-Saharan African excuse on colonialism requires serious self-introspection when he said:

...anybody who says do not blame anything on (imperialism), colonialization and apartheid is being mischievous. Most of the problems we must deal with right now are a consequence of colonialism and apartheid. It is critical that we never stop talking about it. What we can not do is blame it all on colonialism and apartheid... (*The Citizen Newspaper*, 24 November 2019).

Also, the relative stability and predictability of the economies of Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, Tanzania, Seychelles, Ghana, and Rwanda (operating under the same so-called imperialist and neo-colonial systems) pours cold water on claims that imperialism is a major obstacle for Africa's growth.

In Zambia for instance, the economy is on a free-fall, courtesy of a corrupt and inept regime (in power from 2011 to August 2021). Under these circumstances, putting blame on colonialism is misplaced and simply a ploy to divert people's attention from the regimes' failures to deliver.

Dunn and Shaw (2001) explain that the key learning for sub-Saharan Africa is that no region of the world can attract FDI in a climate of economic unpredictability occasioned by grand corruption, civil strife, coup d'états and absence of constitutionalism. Self-awareness therefore, is going to be key for sub-Saharan Africa's growth. Mutambara (2019) suggests that the region should reinvent itself and be innovative in a manner of adaptation rather than contestation

to the international systems. Sub-Saharan Africans should be the masters of their own destiny and should avoid outsourcing the resolution of their challenges.

In 2019 alone, seven Western envoys including a US ambassador were expelled from sub-Saharan Africa - this goes to show the alarming gaps in good governance practices. Zambia, Malawi, Benin, DR Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, and Somalia sacked the envoys on allegations that the diplomats were meddling in the internal local politics (*The African Exponent*, 2019). It can be argued however, that the expulsions confirm the long-held fears by the US regarding bad governance practices in Africa which include, threats and intimidation of whistle blowers, stifling of media freedoms, lack of accountability and transparency. The pattern in Africa seems to be that any foreign institution that questions its undemocratic tendencies is branded as interfering in the local politics. An analytical viewpoint would reveal that these interventions from the US could in fact be healthy as they act as checks and balances given that most local civil society organisations' voices are muzzled by African regimes (*The African Exponent*, 2019). Zambia for instance, expelled the US ambassador Daniel Foote in 2019 after the envoy exposed the regimes' perennial corruption scandals and expressed public dismay at the regimes' jailing of two gays to 15 years in prison. The ambassador questioned the rationale behind the gay jail sentence arguing that the regime seemed obsessed with issues that are of less importance to the country's economic growth. By bringing in the gay fanfare, the regime was trying to play to the cultural gallery where most conservative Zambians resent homosexuality, thereby divert attention from the regimes' ineptitude. Ambassador Foote argued that:

...such oppressive sentencing does untold damage to Zambia's international reputation by demonstrating that human rights in Zambia are not a universal guarantee. Such sentences perpetuate persecution against disenfranchised groups and minorities, such as people from other tribes or people from other political affiliations, albinos, the disabled, lesbians, gays, bisexual, transgender, and anyone who is deemed different... (*The New York Times*, 24 December 2019).

Faced with declining legitimacy, majority of the sub-Saharan regimes resort to the use of propaganda and the police to silence the masses. Lack of constitutionalism and disregard of the rule of law in Africa can be illustrated in many other situations: for instance, in Uganda, Burundi, Gabon, Cameroun, Ivory Coast, Guinea, and Congo Brazzaville. Circumvention of term limits has weakened governance in sub-Saharan Africa, the regimes there have tampered with their national constitutions in order to extend the presidential limits beyond the stipulated two-term limit (*The African Exponent*, 2019). Personalisation of the state seems commonplace and regime survival is prioritised over state survival through corruption, police brutality and rigging of elections. Another interviewee of this study, Habtamu Wondimu argues that:

...today's narrative has changed – threats and political power are insufficient to suppress peoples' views. Bad governance traits alienate people from the government and erode public trust in state institutions. Abuse of human rights concealed with a fig leaf of national sovereignty no longer hold purchase in a globalised world...

(Personal Interview, 14 February 2020).

As Dunn and Shaw (2001) have emphasised, no tangible and sustainable investments will come to sub-Saharan Africa if the region remains unstable and unwilling to engage in good governance practices.

## 6 Alternatives for Sub-Saharan Africa

If what has happened to the Asian Tigers, (i.e., Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan) is any barometer, sub-Saharan Africa will need to reassert itself by emulating the Tigers' culture of creativity, industrial innovation, and fiscal discipline. This, in part, also means that the ideals of the African renaissance espoused by former South African President Thabo Mbeki can only be realised if Africans themselves reclaim the agency in their own cause (Mutambara, 2019). Critical theory and post-colonial theories remind the subaltern populations to focus on struggles that reveal how an alternative society is already imminent within their current social order (Linklater, 2007). In this connection, continental unity is going to be crucial for sub-Saharan Africa's growth. Mutambara (2019) counsels that a region is a better unit of analysis than the nation-state, and that numbers make a difference under globalization. Continental



integration and unity is the basis of survival under globalization as opposed to an emphasis on national sovereignty. The signing of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) treaty in 2018 is therefore a milestone towards the realisation of this goal. The main objective of AfCFTA is to create a single continental market for goods and services with free movement of people and investments. Another interviewee of this study, Kuruvilla Mathews opines that:

...for the AfCFTA to achieve its lofty aims, sub-Saharan polities must be democratic, accountable, transparent, united and should start electing visionary political leaders. Most significantly, there should be fiscal discipline, i.e., fiscal consolidation of resource management. These aspirations are themselves embedded in the AU's Agenda 2063 - a blueprint for transforming the continent through inclusive and sustainable development strategies...

(Personal Interview, 23 December 2019).

Agenda 2063 envisions African growth through collective prosperity as espoused by the high priests of pan-Africanism such as Kwame Nkrumah, Haile Selassie and Julius Nyerere, and now followed through by African Renaissance legends such as Thomas Sankara, Levy Mwanawasa and John Magufuli (Iroulo, 2017).

Kuruvilla Mathews further laments that:

...much of sub-Saharan Africa's ills are mainly a result of poor political leadership and a focus by its leaders on power politics rather than development politics. The failure of the sub-Saharan region to identify diligent and formidable leaders who would serve and galvanise the population to transcend the bottom line is unfortunate. Also, the lack of earnest application of the guidelines of the AU and its auxiliary bodies on good governance practices such as the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and the New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) has dealt a blow to the sub-Saharan prospects of growth...

(Personal Interview, 23 December 2019).

Regrettably, the AU which is supposed to oversee these processes has, itself performed dismally in the provision of assertive leadership (Baderin, and McCorquodale, 2007).

The other option for sub-Saharan Africa is to partner with the BRICS countries, particularly with China. There is potential for more initiatives to enhance growth activities of BRICS in the sub-Saharan region. Contrary to Western scare-mongering propaganda against China, the Chinese are in Africa, not to advance Maoism, but to tap sub-Saharan Africa's resources through contractual capital projects in infrastructure development such as the construction of railways, roads, and strategic buildings such as the AU headquarters in Ethiopia. Chinese trade with sub-Saharan Africa might not, after all, be as predatory as many argue. In 2018 for instance, Chinese FDI to sub-Saharan states amounting to nearly US\$5.4 billion was directed to sectors such as, leasing, business services, manufacturing, education, media, and technological programs. Africans can seize this opportunity to further their growth (Statista Report, 2019).

In this context, the emergence of China in Africa may be partly attributed to the poor relations between the US and sub-Saharan Africa. The former colonial powers such as Britain and France who are supposed to be the 'natural and preferred' trade partners also have the same policies as the US, i.e., they emphasize on a range of democratic values as a prerequisite to recipients of their FDI. If the US and the EU were more generous with FDI conditionalities towards the sub-Saharan region, Africans would not have been swayed to look to the East. As Moyo (2018) has argued, sub-Saharan Africa is building trade ties centred on China and these ties will be there for a foreseeable future due to a huge loan portfolio that China has availed the region with minimal conditions. The Beijing Summit (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation) in September 2018 manifested Chinese prowess of political mobilisation of sub-Saharan states where it pledged \$60 billion for Africa with 'no strings attached'. This is a huge setback for the US which puts stringent conditionalities on its aid packages (*The Washington Post*, 3 September 2019). The seemingly crumbling of relations between sub-Saharan Africa and the US is manifesting in other nuanced ways such as Ethiopia's landmark launch of its observatory satellite into space in December 2019 with the help of China. Political observers opine that such activities may be pointing to the gradual shift of sub-Saharan Africa from the West to the emerging markets, BRICS (*Al Jazeera News*, 20 December 2019).

Furthermore, the Sochi conference (Russia-Africa summit) in October 2019 could be another signal of sub-Saharan Africa's gradual leaning towards the East. This maybe a Machiavellian strategy by Russia to seek footholds in sub-Saharan Africa and undermine US influence in the region. At the Sochi summit, issues of sovereignty and the promotion of a less unipolar world were key discussion points. Also, Russia's recent involvement in military activities to curb insurgencies in Central African Republic and now in Mozambique tends to support the view of Africa's shift to the East. All these activities - however subtle they may appear - could gradually erode the US influence in sub-Saharan

Africa. Critics argue that the Chinese and Russian conferences have no real substance and are there merely for political window dressing. While these criticisms cannot simply be dismissed as idle speculation, it should be borne in mind that symbolic gestures in IR do have influence and their long-term impact should not be understated (*The Moscow Times*, 26 October 2019).

Strategic thinkers caution that the BRICS as an alternative solution for sub-Saharan Africa should be critically examined. If not harnessed with due care, reliance on BRICS could prove to be counterproductive in the long-term. The long-held notions of south-south solidarity which may still be popular among sub-Saharan states, no longer have much significance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century politics. Today, commercial interests are the key drivers of economic diplomacy, and as such, relying on the solidarity ideology is a misguided supposition. BRICS are not chiefly concerned with sub-Saharan Africa's economic emancipation agenda; rather, they are pursuing commercial goals to further their own interests, hence the need to be cautious. Further, political influences from China - a country with a poor record on human rights - might gradually aid the entrenchment of passive forms authoritarianism in sub-Saharan Africa (Soko and Qobo, 2016). It can be argued however, that despite the US flaws, America has tried to be an influential force in the universalisation of liberal values. The US has also assisted in upholding the democratic order in IR through support rendered to global institutions. The US could still play an influential role to mitigate the effects of bad governance practices in sub-Saharan Africa by constructively engaging the region particularly through FDI. The ideological differences between the US and sub-Saharan Africa could best be resolved through discourse channels that are free from a proliferating range of conditionalities, prejudice and mistrust.

## 7 Conclusion

Sub-Saharan Africa and the US today stand at a crossroads in their relations. The US seems to be in a typical catch-22 situation as it appears to have lost face with most sub-Saharan states due to the perception that the trade deals between them are one-sided in favour of the US.

In general however, the US will get much more out of sub-Saharan Africa if they treat Africans as allies and say to them, 'look, these are things that are not going to fly', rather than try to humiliate them which is what the penchant has been. The perceived US demands for Africans to pass purity tests on governance may not help the consolidation of relations with the US. The indifference that is exhibited by both parties to the unfolding political realities has meant that both are not able to embrace unfamiliar but otherwise positive constructions that may show up on the horizon. It should be noted that in IR, 'hot heads and cold hearts' have never solved anything and there can be no alternative to constructive dialogue. From a scientific point of view, any one can approach an ideological inquiry or a foreign policy roadmap in any manner they choose. However, they cannot properly describe the methodology of such an inquiry to be methodical if they start with the conclusion and refuse to change it regardless of the evidence developed during the course of the investigation. So, the ideological differences between sub-Saharan Africa and the US can best be resolved through discourse channels that are free from a proliferating range of conditionalities, prejudice and mistrust. At present, there appears to be a stalemate to achieving positive relations. This can largely be attributed to the US hegemonic attitude which has tended to demean sub-Saharan African initiatives. In turn, the region has also developed an equally indifferent attitude towards the US policies, hence the quandary. Given the supposedly roller coaster relationship discussed in the paper, the US will need to re-evaluate its foreign policy for sub-Saharan Africa; the US is going to need every conceivable option, diplomatic or otherwise, in order to win back the trust and confidence of the sub-Saharan states, bit by bit, if nothing else. This synopsis is a reminder of the fact that part of the human vulnerability is the 'global commons factor' and as such, we cannot help but live together. Social cooperation makes everyone dependant on others. In this pit of stalemate that the US seem to have thrown themselves into, there is no elevator out of it; the US will have to take 'stairs' one by one.

The values and good governance practices that the US lectures to sub-Saharan Africa will always remain rhetoric if they do not correspond to the US own practical examples on the ground. With the emerging markets of BRICS asserting themselves on the global stage through strategic partnerships with sub-Saharan Africa, the US may soon come to realise that they may be holding power without any influence.

With the expulsion in 2019 of several Western envoys from sub-Saharan Africa, it can be argued that diplomatic relations between the two parties might have reached an all-time low. Whatever else may still be left in their relations could simply be window dressing. Political analysts point to the rise of identity politics in the US as the contributory cause which also means that in addition to losing influence, the US is also increasingly seen in sub-Saharan Africa as a source of global instabilities and inequalities.

However, despite the US flaws, it can be argued that it has made strides to be an influential force in the universalisation of democratic governance. The US has also been pivotal in upholding the liberal order through global institutions. As such, the US can still play an influential role to mitigate the effects of bad governance in sub-Saharan Africa by constructively engaging the region and increasing its FDI portfolio.

## Notes

- Wondimu (2020), Interview with author, 14 February 2020, Addis Ababa-Ethiopia. *Habtamu Wondimu is Professor of Psychology and Director of College of Education and Behavioural Studies, Addis Ababa University.*
- Beyazen (2020), Interview with author, 12 February 2020, Addis Ababa-Ethiopia. *Kefale Beyazen is Lecturer in Political Science and International Studies, Bahir Dar University.*
- Maloka (2020), Interview with author, 4 February 2020, Addis Ababa-Ethiopia. *Eddy Maloka is Chief Executive Officer of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and Adjunct Professor of History, Governance and Development Management at University of Witwatersrand.*
- Asmamaw (2020), Interview with author, 24 January 2020, Addis Ababa-Ethiopia. *Yechale Asmamaw is Photogrammetrist and Postgraduate Student in Geography and Environmental Studies (Focus Group Team Leader), Addis Ababa University.*
- Gudina (2019), Interview with author, 23 December 2019, Addis Ababa-Ethiopia. *Merera Gudina is Professor of Political Science and African Politics, Addis Ababa University.*
- Mathews (2019), Interview with author, 23 December 2019, Addis Ababa-Ethiopia. *Kuruvilla Mathews is Professor of International Relations and African Politics, Addis Ababa University.*

**Short Bio:** I am a PhD candidate in Political Science (African Studies) as well as Teaching Assistant. My research interests are in Human rights, International Relations & Security, Democratization, and Humanitarian Intervention.

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**Significance of this study and its suitability for publication:** This paper is framed within the context of Foreign Policy analysis and Globalization studies which focus on strategies that inform policy and practice between the US and sub-Saharan Africa. This paper is significant and suitable for publication because it highlights the roller coaster relations between the US and sub-Saharan Africa and shows how they are mainly due to a US foreign policy that does not seem to be flexible to the changing global dynamics. The paper navigates the areas that both entities can improve upon to change the status quo. Further, the study also opens the door for further research in critical areas such as security and technology that may be explored by other scholars in the quest to find solutions for better relations between the US and sub-Saharan Africa. Central to this study's argument is the proposition that the issues of global commons should be tackled in a more cooperative and sustainable manner with a win-win perspective. In today's intertwined global political economies, it is no longer persuasive to rely on systems that are free market oriented (only in theory) but fail

to show their practical significance on the ground. For instance, subsidies on US products (especially farm products) continue to form trade imbalances with sub-Saharan Africa which effectively renders African agricultural economies as mere chattels of US trade institutions. The context of this argument is that trade, commerce, and technologies must not simply be capital efficient but must also be environmentally, ecologically, and ethically sustainable. When this sustainability argument is properly addressed, then the issues of trade imbalances will not occur, or at least will be minimized. For this to be sustained, trade partners must all believe that they are benefiting from those partnerships and collaborations in an equitable manner. At present, this position does not seem to be the case between the US and sub-Saharan Africa in their relations, whether it be in trade, security or in climate change.

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