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THE ROLE OF ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY IN STRENGTHENING U.S.-FRANCOPHONE AFRICA BUSINESS RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Africa is not prioritized in the U.S. diplomatic strategy and engagement, but with an increasing population and substantial essential natural resources, countries, and global forces are becoming more deliberate about their relations with Africa. It has become necessary for the United States to redefine its approach to Africa, with a particular emphasis on Francophone Africa. This review examines the various initiatives from different U.S. administrations, the challenges from within and outside the U.S., to the success and longevity of these initiatives. China has made inroads into critical sectors of the economies of some Francophone countries by identifying challenges in the provision of critical infrastructure and offering solutions to these regimes. The review recommends a focused Africa agenda, differentiation of U.S. strategy from the historical influences of France, full utilization of the potential of AfCFTA, and high-level diplomatic engagement as ways to revive its dwindling influence within the Francophone bloc.

KEY WORDS: *Diplomatic, United States, Francophone Africa, Engagement*

INTRODUCTION

As countries like China and Russia emerge as influential global forces, it has become necessary for global powerhouses like the United States to reconsider their relations with other countries and regions within the context of their interests—the evolution of commerce and technology. Climate and demand for mineral resources have made the need for this revision of foreign relations even more critical. Economic diplomacy covers issues related to trade, commerce, and collaboration to promote development (Okano-Heijmans, 2016).

"Economic diplomacy "refers to both the use of political means as leverage in international negotiations with the aim of enhancing national economic prosperity and the use of economic leverage to increase a country's political stability. Activities subsumed under this umbrella term range considerably, from trade and investment promotion (including through economic missions and intelligence sharing) and negotiations on economic and financial agreements, to inducements such as development assistance and coercive measures like economic sanctions." (Okano-Heijmans, 2016, p.553)

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) describes economic diplomacy as "government services and support provided to business in foreign markets. This can take the form of financial support such as export credits, investment guarantees, and direct lending, but can also include other public services such as trade missions, capacity building activities, and access to information and networks through embassies" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2017).

In the specific case of the United States, "Economic diplomacy means we use American economic power and influence as a tool of foreign policy to benefit Americans. We build relationships that create jobs, sustain American businesses, and spur economic growth" (Pompeo, 2018). Economic diplomacy is a critical aspect of U.S. foreign policy and links U.S. interests, international trade, and economic operations. In America's

relationship with Francophone Africa, economic diplomacy takes the form of trade agreements, investment opportunities, and developmental aid. These programs and initiatives are geared towards responding to the influence of France and the attempts of forces like China to gain a foothold among the Francophone nations.
French is the official language of 29 African countries that were colonies of France. These countries make up Francophone Africa.

Tools of U.S. Economic Diplomacy
The United States utilizes policies, approaches, and plans to achieve the objectives that necessitated the establishment of diplomatic relations between itself and the Francophone Africa bloc and secure its interests.

Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)
United States administrations and Congress have instituted programs to enhance economic development in Africa and increase trade and investment between Africa and the United States (Husted et al., 2023). For 25 years, AGOA has been a focal framework on which American trade and economic relations with Africa are established. African countries that satisfy AGOA's requirements benefit from tax exemptions for over 1800 products they bring to the United States. Countries making strides to entrench democratic systems, remove bottlenecks to American economic participation in their jurisdictions, and entrench social protection and anti-graft legislation qualify as beneficiary countries (Office of the United States Trade Representative, n.d.). Out of the 32 eligible countries for AGOA, 11 are French-speaking. The non-eligible French-speaking countries are characterized by political upheaval. It is worth noting that, of the 17 African countries that do not qualify for the program, 11 are Francophone. For 2024, 3 Francophone countries are among the 5 countries named top exporters to the United States (Congressional Research Service, 2025). Considering that 11 Francophone countries are suspended from AGOA, the potential trade numbers between the United States could be enormous. The United States imported $8 billion worth of products from AGOA countries in 2024(Congressional Research Service, 2025). Mauritius has maximized the advantage that AGOA affords in its textile and apparel industry (Moustafa & El-Shal, 2025).

Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC)
The MCC describes itself as "a builder, catalyst, and dealmaker for blended finance transactions and mobilizes private capital for public good in its partner countries" (Millennium Challenge Corporation [MCC], n.d.). The MCC has funded programs in some Francophone countries, including Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Benin, and Senegal. These programs covered sectors such as education, electricity expansion, telecommunications, transportation, and energy. Funds were also provided to Francophone countries for due diligence, including monitoring of ongoing projects (ForeignAssistance.gov, n.d.). The MCC is set to be shut down by the Trump administration, as its work does not align with the administration's focus and direction. Some of the affected countries, which have requested time to close their programs with the corporation, are Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal (Johansen, 2025).

U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC)
The DFC was established by Congress in 2019 and is a governmental agency that collaborates with private players to raise funds for projects worldwide. It was set up to reinforce America's standing as a global economic powerhouse and as a response to China's incursions into regions of prime importance to the United States and its interests. The areas where the DFC encourages investment are energy, food security, health, minerals, infrastructure, small enterprises, and financial services (U.S. International Development Finance Corporation [DFC], n.d.). For the fiscal year 2024, the DFC committed close to $8 million for programs and initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa in basic education, financial services, and industry. This was done in collaboration with private sector enterprises and institutions. For the same fiscal year, Burundi and Madagascar were the Francophone countries that benefited from DFC and private sector partnership in the energy sector to $5 million (ForeignAssistance.gov, n.d.).

Prosper Africa
This initiative was aimed at enhancing and expanding economic ties between America and Africa for economic benefits of both sides. This initiative was also introduced as a countermeasure to the inroads that China and Russia were making into the African continent.

The U.S Agency for International Development (USAID) was to bring together the skills, resources, and initiatives of 17 departments and agencies of the United States government under the Prosper Africa initiative. The USAID was the umbrella body that streamlined the activities of all the departments and agencies engaged in programs and efforts to enhance trade between the United States and Africa. The agencies under Prosper Africa included the Millennium Challenge Corporation and the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation. By 2022,

Prosper Africa had reported 280 investments in more than 30 countries, translating into $22 billion in finalized funding arrangements, which would allow businesses to take off. The areas of focus for Prosper Africa were financial services, infrastructure, energy, agribusiness, health, and digital transformation (Cook & Williams, 2020). With the shutdown of the USAID and the inability to pass the Prosper Africa Act (U.S. Congress, 2022), the fate of the initiative rests solely with the current U.S. leadership.

Challenges to the U.S. Economic Relations in the Francophone Bloc

Political Instability

U.S.-Francophone Africa policy is hindered by political instability in some Francophone countries. The United States is still grappling with designing and implementing an effective strategy that safeguards democracy while protecting its interests among Francophone countries (Chin & Bartos, 2024). In the last 5 years, coups have taken place in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Guinea, and Gabon. According to the Afrobarometer (2023), Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea have seen a decline in preference among their populace for democratic systems. There has also been an inclination towards military systems in Mali, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire. The citizenry has become less accommodating of democratic systems that lack transparency and accountability, and fail to meet their aspirations. This is a challenge for the United States because its economic policy interventions in Africa set democratic advancements and anti-corruption benchmarks as qualifying requirements for countries to participate in their economic programs. As anti-democratic sentiment and support flourish in some Francophone countries, as a consequence of the failure of democratic governance, U.S. economic policy and the objective to gain influence in the bloc for economic and security reasons are hindered.

The France Factor

According to Niang (n.d.), in its outlook and actions towards its former colonies, France engaged Francophone in a self-serving enterprise motivated by the need to keep a stranglehold on Francophone Africa's resources and an extension of French influence and power in global affairs. Crucially, during this period, France had the support of the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). One of the lasting vestiges of this arrangement between France and its former colonies in Africa is the CFA Franc, which is still legal tender in 14 African countries. This is the starting point of a much wider domination by France of the economic and financial affairs of Francophone Africa. With France increasingly losing its influence over Francophone Africa, it is time for the United States to devise its own Francophone Africa agenda, which would also inform economic engagement within the context of the political and security landscape of the region. According to an Afrobarometer survey (2021), the United States leads China among 34 countries as the development system of choice. This presents the United States with an opportunity it cannot miss to establish long-lasting economic influence within the Francophone bloc while counteracting the growing acceptance of China and other rivals as favorable economic systems, which are worth emulating.

The Rise of China and Russia

Some Francophone African regimes have formed close ties with Russia regarding security. Russia and China's positions in Francophone Africa have been enhanced amid a wind-down of French activity (N'tsia, 2025). Countries like Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Niger have turned to Russia for military assistance while rejecting America overtures to provide security against terrorism and insurgency (Chin&Bartos, 2024; Hammer, 2024; Ahmed, 2023; Schmitt, 2024). Putting this development within the context of deep historical ties between the United States and France in the area of security cooperation within the Francophone Africa bloc leaves America without a security ally. This would invariably have implications for the U.S.'s security and economic interests.

At the 2024 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), President Xi Jinping pledged to, among others, help Africa address its energy challenges, make the continent a priority in the global security initiative, support the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and pledged over $ 50 billion of projects and investments in Africa over three years (Xinhua News Agency, 2024).

According to McBride et.al. (2023), China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has been extended to Africa, is an infrastructure-driven agenda but with clear economic motivations. This program has led to major infrastructure projects in the energy sector in countries like Madagascar, the D.R. Congo, Cameroon, Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Mali. These projects are executed as loans to these countries at commercial market value. Countries have signed on to the BRI as a way to finance huge infrastructure projects while dealing with economic distress, where the United States and other Western forces are unwilling to assist. Russia has pledged its support to the BRI (McBride, Berman, & Chatzky, 2023). With the United States not implementing a clear strategy in the Francophone bloc and China's preparedness to meet their current infrastructural needs, China

continues to gain ground in its influence over the bloc, which has negative implications for the U.S. economic interests and U.S. companies (Lew, Roughead, Hillman, & Sacks, 2021).

Addressing These Challenges

Intentional Policymaking on Africa/Francophone Africa

According to Opalo (2023), with rising backlash and unpopularity of French involvement in Francophone African affairs, America risks losing influence and goodwill within the bloc if this growing negative disposition extends to all Western forces. The U.S. can offer support in education, financial aid, digital transformation, and a destination for a wide range of products from the bloc. These are benefits that Francophone Africa can derive from positive relations with the United States. It is prudent for the U.S. to carve out a unique policy that sheds historical leanings with France and its policies for the Francophone bloc (Opalo, 2023). The Afrobarometer survey, which indicated a generally positive outlook towards the American style of development, is indicative that relations between the U.S. and the bloc are not entirely unsalvageable.

African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)

This free trade zone has 54 members and a population of approximately 1.4 billion. Its purpose is to facilitate enhanced trade relations between African countries and boost their economic growth. While AfCFTA has taken effect, certain aspects governing its full implementation are still subject to deliberation (Cook & Wong, 2023). A Memorandum of Understanding between the United States and AfCFTA to promote collaboration for enhanced relations and knowledge exchange. The Biden administration pledged $55 billion in support for trade and commerce efforts as part of its Africa agenda during the U.S.-Africa Leaders' Summit (Scoles & Solomon, 2023). The current Trump administration's focus on policies and strategies that have America and its interests at the center of their activities, while shutting down long-standing institutions and ending programs established to assist countries (including those in Francophone Africa), nothing may come of these financial pledges to African leaders and technical collaboration with AfCFTA.

Infrastructure Projects as a Way Back

In the last few years, different U.S. administrations have attempted some initiatives aimed at undercutting China's strong position among the political leadership and key decision-makers within Francophone Africa and on the continent, ensuring the supply of critical minerals for the U.S. economy, and bringing development to African countries as a way of relations, standing and popular sentiment about the United States among African leadership and publics.

The Lobito Corridor

This is a 1,300-kilometer railway line that connects the Democratic Republic of Congo to the Lobito port in Angola. This project is part of U.S. efforts to secure its critical minerals supply while regaining some sway in parts of Africa (Schipani, 2024). The Lobito Atlantic Railway Company is obligated, per the terms of the concession agreement, to invest $100 million in the DR Congo (United Nations Zambia, 2024). The Trump administration has offered its commitment to the Lobito project by assuring a $550 million loan for the project (Goko, 2025).

The Global Partnership for Infrastructure and Investment (GPI)

According to the White House (2024), the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and Japan, which constitute the G7, designed this initiative to assist developing countries in improving their critical infrastructure. As of 2024, U.S. government-led efforts in the public and private sectors had raised more than $60 billion for PGI projects. The Biden administration committed to raising $200 billion of the $600 billion earmarked by the G7 for this initiative. The U.S. is providing $16 million under the PGI initiative to build or refurbish 100 health facilities in Côte d'Ivoire (Yu, 2024).

A New Direction

The Trump administration is redefining U.S. Africa policy by redirecting the focus on trade and commerce instead of financial assistance. In this vein, U.S. diplomatic officials will be assessed on their success in facilitating business agreements and not the assistance they expend. This new direction was unveiled in Côte d'Ivoire (Goko, 2025). This new focus emphasizes private-sector-driven initiatives to promote economic engagement with Africa. Engage Africa through the perspective of equal partnership, not as a strong force helping a weak ally. To achieve this, 6 key steps are outlined, which would be undertaken in collaboration with U.S. enterprises, African administrations, and other relevant players. These steps are: making trade and business the central point of diplomatic relations with Africa, collaborating with African countries that are key to the U.S.-Africa strategy to

remove hindrances to trade and investment by U.S. companies, delivering infrastructure projects of economic value that stimulate growth and drive businesses into beneficiary countries, encouraging increased trade and investment centered diplomatic visits to Africa, exposing U.S. businesses that are unfamiliar with doing business in Africa to the prospects that Africa holds, and promoting policy and regulatory modifications that improve the ease of doing business for U.S. companies (Fitrell, 2025). In line with this, since the Trump administration took office, some agreements have been reached between U.S. companies and some African countries. These countries are Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Guinea, Benin, and Burkina Faso. DiSabatino Construction is set to provide 150,000 units of accommodation in collaboration with the Ministry of Construction in Côte d'Ivoire. Cybastion is working with Gabon to provide digital infrastructure. The same company has entered various agreements with the governments of Guinea, Benin, and Burkina Faso, all aimed at providing digital solutions and infrastructure against cybersecurity breaches (U.S. Embassy in Côte d'Ivoire, 2025). This redefined African agenda and its implementation have been questioned because the policy favors the promotion of U.S. commerce, while the benefits to Africa are not highlighted. The dominance of non-American companies in the infrastructure sector, the closure of offices that execute Africa's developmental agenda, and the cancellation of policies that promote trade and commerce with Africa, it remains to be seen how this redefined Africa policy would be implemented (Moore, 2025). The African Leaders Summit, to be hosted by the Trump administration, will provide more insight into the Africa engagement strategy.

Improving U.S. Economic Diplomacy in Francophone Africa: Recommendations

The United States can pursue some policies and strategies to improve its political and economic relations with the Francophone Africa bloc.

High-level diplomatic engagement, which prioritizes Francophone Africa as a strategic partner, will send a message that the United States values the bloc as an important contributor to the achievement of America's overall African foreign relations goals (Day, 2021).

In the wake of China's engagements in Africa, the United States should communicate its commitment to actualizing this vision clearly and show no negative opinions or rebukes of China's developments on the continent, as this raises doubts about U.S. policy motives (Neema, 2021).

The Trump administration must show commitment to the Partnership for Global Infrastructure if the U.S. desires to consolidate its position as a global superpower and regain some of its preeminence on the African continent to effectively counter inroads being made by China and other forces in Africa in the provision of essential infrastructure that the continent needs (Arun, 2024).

According to the 2025 Global Terrorism Index, 5 Francophone African countries namely Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, DR Congo, and Cameroon are part of the top 10 countries in the world with the highest deaths from terrorism (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025). With rising insurgency in the Sahel (Chin&Bartos, 2024), the U.S. needs to provide implementable solutions acceptable to all parties to the insecurity in the region as it affects national security both at home and abroad, and has implications for the new focus on increased commercial engagement with Africa. Collaboration to enhance security should anchor all other policies in Africa (Chin&Bartos, 2024) as insecurity is a threat to American businesses and citizens.

The United States should continue to support efforts for the full implementation of AfCFTA, as it would enhance trade and development on the continent. This aligns with the "trade not aid" agenda of the Trump administration. AfCFTA provides the U.S. access to a large market for its products, ensuring mutual benefits for the U.S. and Africa (Signé, 2019).

CONCLUSION

As the Francophone Africa bloc continues to evolve politically, discussions of economic diplomacy with the U.S. become layered and complicated. While the relationship holds promise for substantial mutual benefits, the failure of the United States to prioritize Africa and the bloc and define its own political and economic relations with the bloc, coupled with the dislodgement of France (an ally) as the most influential foreign force within the bloc has left the United States without a strong political and economic standing within the bloc. The new U.S. government's decision to end some key initiatives in Francophone Africa, like the Millennium Challenge Compact, will not help the general outlook towards the United States within the bloc. A well-designed African engagement strategy that recognizes the unique groupings within the continent (like Francophone Africa) and provides policies and strategies to engage with these blocs through a high-level, mutually beneficial framework, cognizant of the needs

and aspirations of the people, will enhance current and future economic collaboration between the United States and Francophone Africa.

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