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# Biden seeks a reset with U.S.-Africa summit

Experts say the administration must offer more than just pomp and circumstance to compete on the continent.



President Biden participates in the U.S.-Africa Summit Leaders session on partnering on the African Union's Agenda 2063, Thursday, Dec. 15, 2022, in Washington. (AP Photo/Patrick Semansky)

**Cristina Maza**

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**T**he Biden administration launched a vast diplomatic offensive this week to bring African leaders into long-term partnerships with the United States as China and Russia court leaders of the fastest-growing continent.

The U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, a three-day event in Washington, D.C. that gathered heads of state and government from 49 of Africa's 54 countries, kicked off high-level discussions about how the U.S. can work with the continent. Only the leaders of Guinea, Sudan, Mali, and Burkina Faso were left off the guest list because they seized power in recent coups. Eritrea also didn't receive an invitation because the country has no diplomatic ties to the U.S.

The decision not to invite leaders lacking democratic credentials set the U.S. apart from Russia and China, which do not prioritize democracy and human rights in their diplomatic engagements. But experts say the Biden administration must offer more than just the pageantry of a high-level event if it wants to compete for global influence in a multipolar world.

“One of the biggest issues in the relationship with different African countries has been this narrative that African countries are backward, useless, and of no merit, and are generally a net drain or drag,” said Uzodinma Iweala, the chief executive officer of the Africa Center, a nonprofit based in New York. “It's an old narrative that has been persistent until this day and has unfortunately governed, whether explicitly or implicitly, the way folks do foreign policy.”

“If you want a good relationship, you have to think of the continent as a place of opportunity and start with a foreign policy that recognizes the agency and importance of African countries, leaders, and people,” Iweala added. “I think this is the U.S.'s attempt to reset.”

The effort to shift the U.S. relationship with Africa began under former President Obama, who invited dozens of African leaders to Washington for a similar three-day summit in 2014. It was the largest event the U.S. had ever held with African officials.

But efforts to forge a long-term alliance faltered under former President Trump, who was largely uninterested and occasionally hostile towards the continent. That left an opening for countries like China and Russia to ramp up investment. Beijing is currently involved in infrastructure projects in at least 35 African countries. Chinese trade with Africa reached a record \$254 billion last year, around four times the amount of trade between the U.S. and Africa.

Moscow, meanwhile, spread its influence in countries like the Central African Republic, South Africa, Sudan, Libya, and Mali using a blend of propaganda, mercenary paramilitary groups, and arms sales.

Now, eight years after Obama's charm offensive, President Biden is attempting to pick up where his Democratic predecessor left off. He has positioned himself as an advocate for the continent's more prominent role in world affairs, voicing support for an African seat on the United Nations Security Council and arguing that the African Union should join the Group of 20 as a permanent member.

The first days of the administration's summit also marked big announcements about U.S. investment. As African leaders arrived in Washington, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan took to the podium of the White House briefing room and said the U.S. would invest \$55 billion in Africa over the next three years.

"We're bringing the resources to the table in significant numbers," Sullivan told reporters. "And if you compare what the U.S. is committing over the next three years to what any other country is committing, I think we stack up extremely

favorably.”

U.S. officials often shy away from mentioning China or Russia by name to avoid giving the impression they are cajoling African partners into cutting ties with U.S. competitors. But the announced funding and high-level meetings are meant to counter the outreach of Moscow and Beijing.

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**— UZODINMA IWEALA, THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF THE AFRICA CENTER**

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Russia hosted its first Russia-Africa summit in 2019, inviting dozens of leaders to the Black Sea resort of Sochi. That was just one year after China pledged to invest \$60 billion in aid and loans to the continent. Nevertheless, officials in

Washington hope that African leaders will see them as the “partner of choice.”

Anne Griffin, a senior fellow covering Africa at the Center for American Progress, said Washington is trying to offer African countries a better alternative to Chinese loans or Russian arms exports.

“They’re offering something different, whether it’s models of democracy or even the kinds of arrangements that are made in investments,” Griffin said. “The U.S. is trying to be authentic about their approach and let the cards fall where they may when it comes to decisions from different African countries.”

Vice President Kamala Harris opened the summit by announcing the U.S. would invest \$100 million in the Young African Leaders Initiative, which supports African civic or business leaders who want to conduct academic work or fellowships. Harris also noted the U.S. Export-Import Bank would enter new agreements leading to around \$1 billion in new commercial financing in Africa.

The Biden administration released a flurry of statements highlighting existing programs launched with African countries and regional organizations on health and the environment. It held the first-ever U.S.-Africa Space Forum, where Nigeria and Rwanda signed on to the Artemis Accords, a multilateral agreement on space exploration that aims to see humans return to the moon.

Meanwhile, Biden signed an executive order to create the President’s Advisory Council on African Diaspora Engagement.

He named retired diplomat Johnnie Carson, a 37-year foreign service veteran and former ambassador to Kenya, to be the new special representative for the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with dozens of African leaders throughout the summit and signed a memorandum of understanding with the prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the foreign minister of

Zambia to develop an electric-vehicle value chain.

“The DRC produces more than 70 percent of the world’s cobalt. Zambia is the world’s sixth-largest copper producer, second-largest cobalt producer in Africa. Global demand for critical minerals is going to skyrocket over the next decades,” Blinken said.

It’s unclear how many of these are new efforts and how many are ongoing programs the administration chose to highlight during the week’s events.

Sarah Harrison, a senior analyst at the International Crisis Group who focuses on U.S. foreign policy in Africa, noted the \$55 billion the U.S. announced is money that Congress has already appropriated for various programs. The administration reached out to government agencies to determine the plan so they could make a public commitment to spending the money, she said.

“Congress prior to the summit didn’t pass a new law with new authorities or new money for Africa specifically,” Harrison said.

In the wake of the summit, participants will be looking for concrete actions that the administration will take to follow through on the promises made. That could mean doing something as simple as lifting visa restrictions for various African countries or fostering relationships between African companies and diaspora-owned businesses in the U.S.

“You can talk about investment opportunities and increasing trade back and forth, but that doesn’t mean anything if you’ve still got super restrictive visa policies and it’s hard for people to come over and do business,” said Africa Center's Iweala.

“These are the things you’ll be looking for to see if folks are really serious about increasing the flow of people, trade, and investment,” he added. “A lot of folks are going to be looking to see not just what was announced, but how we are

going to figure out if things are actually happening.”