



Recalibrating Selective Engagement in US-Africa Relations

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Since the independence era of the 1960s, successive US administrations have engaged African countries through diplomacy, trade preferences, development assistance, health initiatives, military cooperation, and strategic investment. These instruments have not always been calibrated to the different priorities, institutional conditions, and strategic characteristics of the countries in which they are deployed, and their effectiveness has often been weakened by uneven coordination and political discontinuity. The question guiding this brief is how the United States can apply selective engagement in Africa, matching its policy instruments to those differences while sustaining relationships that produce durable value for both sides. This question has become more consequential as the range of partnerships available to African governments has expanded. China has simultaneously developed extensive diplomatic and commercial relationships across the continent, including long-term positions in infrastructure and strategic minerals, while African governments themselves have become increasingly assertive in defining the terms, priorities, and expected benefits of their external partnerships.¹

American engagement has produced significant achievements, including the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), security partnerships, and development programs that have created substantial economic and institutional ties across the continent. The persistence of these relationships is essential not because US engagement has failed, as this brief argues, but because its effectiveness varies according to how particular instruments are combined, sustained, and adapted to different national contexts. Effectiveness here means the extent to which an instrument advances a defined US strategic interest, such as supply chain access, basing, or market integration, in ways partner governments value and that persist beyond a single budget or electoral cycle. African governments approach these relationships with priorities of their own, seeking different combinations of investment, technology, security cooperation, market access, and institutional partnership.² Those priorities are contested domestically, and this brief treats them as a starting point. While prominent policy discussions have examined

A Hoover Institution Policy Brief

US-Africa relations through trade policy, geopolitical competition, or broad strategic objectives, this brief focuses more specifically on the fit between policy instruments and partner characteristics.³

The analysis examines the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Nigeria, and Djibouti, three resource-strategic states where US engagement has taken different forms. From those cases, it develops a framework organized around five instruments—diplomatic coordination, private sector facilitation, security cooperation, humanitarian and development programming, and academic exchange—and three operating principles governing their selection, coordination, and duration, then extends it to the other two country types. The framework favors differentiated engagement in which American strategic objectives are pursued through instruments that also respond to the priorities and institutional conditions of African partners.

WHERE SELECTIVE ENGAGEMENT HAS DRIFTED

Selective engagement describes a middle position between primacy and restraint, committing forward presence where core interests are directly implicated and avoiding entanglement elsewhere.⁴ Only parts of Africa meet that threshold. The DRC produces roughly 70 percent of the world's mined cobalt, which makes it central to Congolese development and American supply chain security. Djibouti sits beside the Bab el-Mandeb, through which 9.3 million barrels of oil per day passed in 2023 before flows fell to 4.1 million in 2024 as Houthi attacks pushed vessels onto other routes.⁵ Selectivity means concentrating instruments where American interests and partner priorities converge, as they do at points like these, and accepting costs elsewhere.

Three categories distinguish African partners. Each state is assigned the category matching the main source of US interest: minerals, energy, or geography for resource-strategic states such as the DRC and Djibouti, threat spillover for security-fragile states such as Mali, Somalia, and Sudan, and capacity for trade and institutional partnership for stable partners such as Ghana, Kenya, and Rwanda. Nigeria is a hybrid, with an energy economy and large population alongside an active insurgency. The framework assigns it by what should drive Washington's interest, its economic and technological weight, while security remains a separate track. The three cases test the resource-strategic logic. The prescriptions for the other two categories are illustrative.

Across these contexts, three recurring failures have limited strategic returns. The first failure is institutional discontinuity. AGOA created trade-dependent industries while remaining subject to periodic congressional reauthorization, and PEPFAR's dependence on annual appropriations exposed even a bipartisan, long-horizon program to severe implementation disruption during the 2025 foreign aid freeze.⁶ Power Africa similarly facilitated more than fourteen thousand megawatts of energy projects without institutional anchoring sufficient to ensure continuity across administrative transitions.⁷

The second failure is instrument-context mismatch. AGOA's generic design distributed benefits according to existing export capacity. Counterterrorism assistance in Mali, Niger,

and Burkina Faso came without civilian programs to consolidate security gains, and the coups that followed left those gains exposed.⁸ The third failure is differentiation driven by crisis visibility. The 2022 *US Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa* articulated broad priorities without specifying which instruments should take precedence across different country contexts.⁹ The resulting pattern directs intensive engagement toward crises where gains are highly reversible while underusing trade, technology, investment, and academic instruments where longer-term returns may be more durable.

CASE STUDIES: WHERE THE FRAMEWORK APPLIES

The three cases isolate distinct forms of instrument miscalibration. The DRC shows the costs of sustained mismatch in a resource-strategic state where Washington emphasized humanitarian, governance, and security instruments while Chinese firms accumulated commercial positions in the country's critical-minerals sector, particularly cobalt and copper mining, leaving recent American initiatives to enter an already structured market. Nigeria illustrates instrument fragmentation, with security and governance tracks setting the high-level agenda while commercial and technology engagement proceeds separately in a relationship whose significance spans all of them. Djibouti illustrates instrument monopoly, where a relationship centered on military access allowed a later-arriving competitor to build influence through commercial and infrastructure diversification.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

The DRC's mineral endowment is both its primary source of external strategic significance and a central challenge of its development trajectory. The country produces roughly 70 percent of the world's mined cobalt and holds substantial reserves of coltan, lithium, and copper, yet extraction has historically generated limited domestic industrial development or fiscal returns commensurate with their global significance.¹⁰ Kinshasa has consequently sought investment models that expand in-country processing and domestic value capture.

China began systematic minerals investment in the early 2000s, and the Sicomines agreement exemplified its model, exchanging Chinese-financed infrastructure for long-term copper and cobalt rights.¹¹ Washington's engagement over the same period concentrated on diplomatic, humanitarian, governance, and security concerns, with limited commercial participation in the sector that increasingly defined the DRC's strategic importance. However, that mismatch has begun to change. US participation in efforts to advance the Doha Framework for a Comprehensive Peace Agreement has coincided with the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC)-backed critical-minerals initiatives and other US-supported investment arrangements intended to strengthen American access to Congolese supply chains.¹² These developments mark an initial correction, but they enter a sector in which Chinese firms have spent two decades accumulating mining rights, processing relationships, and building infrastructure positions.¹³ The relevant question is therefore whether recent American initiatives can develop into a durable commercial presence aligned with Congolese industrial priorities.

Those priorities include in-country processing, greater fiscal returns, institutional capacity, and reduced dependence on raw mineral exports.¹⁴ The Congolese government's renegotiation of the Sicomines agreement, culminating in March 2024 in an amended contract that substantially increased infrastructure commitments, reflects the convergence a well-designed American engagement could serve: Kinshasa seeks better terms and diversified partnerships, while Washington seeks a stronger commercial position in the same sector.¹⁵ These interests create space for a commercially anchored US role that serves both Congolese development objectives and American supply chain interests.

The policy implication is therefore to consolidate the recent US commercial reentry around instruments that address both American supply chain interests and Congolese demands for greater domestic value capture. The Development Finance Corporation should use loan guarantees and political-risk insurance to support American investment in cobalt and lithium production and processing, with financing tied to local processing, employment, and technology transfer.¹⁶ Governance reform should operate alongside this commercial strategy rather than determine whether economic engagement proceeds, allowing the State Department to address institutional weaknesses without making commercial participation contingent on prior governance improvements.

NIGERIA

Nigeria's strategic profile spans demographic, economic, technological, and security interests in ways that resist a single instrument framework. With a population exceeding 220 million, one of Africa's largest economies, a dynamic fintech sector, and a substantial diaspora, Nigeria presents dimensions no single American agency is designed to capture.¹⁷ Abuja's development priorities emphasize industrialization, technology, infrastructure, trade, and economic diversification, while American engagement has remained heavily shaped by corruption, human rights concerns, and the Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) insurgencies.¹⁸

These concerns are legitimate, but their prominence has narrowed high-level bilateral engagement. Leahy Law restrictions establish human rights requirements for US security assistance, while the August 2026 US-Nigeria Joint Working Group centered on protecting Christian communities, strengthening judicial and security institutions, and military-to-military cooperation.¹⁹ The meeting illustrates the continued institutional prominence of security and governance concerns even as Nigeria's strategic significance extends well beyond them.

The problem is therefore less the absence of other instruments than the way they are organized across separate bilateral tracks. American firms already participate substantially in Nigeria's technology sector, while Chinese firms such as Huawei have established significant telecommunications positions.²⁰ US-Nigeria engagement has likewise developed dedicated mechanisms for security, governance, commercial cooperation, and technology, but these initiatives do not yet amount to a single strategy calibrated to Nigeria's combined economic, demographic, technological, and security significance.²¹

The policy adjustment should give commercial and technological engagement greater institutional weight while preserving security cooperation as a distinct track. A National Security Council (NSC)-level bilateral strategy should coordinate these instruments, with DFC using its expanded investment and political-risk-insurance authorities to mobilize American private capital in digital infrastructure and other strategically significant sectors.²² Educational and professional exchange can provide the longer-horizon complement through established programs such as the Fulbright Program and Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI), extending bilateral relationships beyond government-to-government security cooperation.²³

DJIBOUTI

Djibouti's strategic relevance derives principally from geography. Located at the mouth of the Red Sea beside the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the country sits astride a major maritime energy route whose vulnerability became particularly visible during the Houthi attacks on commercial shipping. Oil flows through the strait fell from 9.3 million barrels per day in 2023 to 4.1 million in 2024 as vessels diverted from the route.²⁴ Camp Lemonnier anchors the American security relationship. A 2014 agreement extended US access and doubled the annual lease payment to approximately \$63 million.²⁵

The weakness in the relationship is the dominance of that military instrument. Security cooperation and basing access have remained central to US-Djibouti relations, while commercial engagement has operated at a substantially smaller scale.²⁶ China developed a more diversified position through military access, ports, transport infrastructure, and financing. Chinese-backed projects include the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway and the Doraleh Multipurpose Port alongside China's first overseas military base.²⁷ Chinese financing also contributed substantially to Djibouti's external debt exposure, giving the economic relationship significance beyond the military presence.²⁸

That diversification reveals how Djibouti has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to use competing external relationships to increase its bargaining leverage. During the 2014 US lease negotiations, President Ismail Omar Guelleh sought higher payments and additional economic support; the resulting agreement doubled annual US payments amid reports of Chinese and Russian interest in establishing facilities in Djibouti.²⁹ The case therefore illustrates the limits of a bilateral relationship organized primarily around military access, even where that access remains central to US strategic interests.

The policy adjustment should, therefore, diversify the instruments supporting the existing security partnership. Digital infrastructure is one plausible commercial track. Djibouti is already a regional connectivity hub for submarine cables and data traffic, but domestic investment, competition, affordability, and access remain constrained.³⁰ DFC financing could support commercially viable digital infrastructure projects that deepen an American economic presence alongside the military relationship. The State Department could also explore a Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT) with Djibouti, since none currently exists, although Djibouti participates in the US-Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) Trade

and Investment Framework Agreement.³¹ Furthermore, expanded educational and professional exchanges in logistics, maritime affairs, and digital infrastructure would provide a longer-horizon complement to both commercial and security engagement.

A FRAMEWORK FOR CALIBRATED ENGAGEMENT

The case studies show that diminishing strategic returns stem primarily from how American engagement is configured across different contexts. This framework translates that diagnosis into instrument-specific choices, asking which instrument best fits a given country context, which actor is positioned to deploy it, and what objective it serves. Table 1 summarizes the instrument mix for each of the three country types, and the sections that follow take the instruments one at a time. Those instruments are diplomatic coordination, private sector facilitation, security cooperation, humanitarian and development programming, and academic exchange. Three operating principles then govern how these instruments should be combined and sustained across political cycles.

TABLE 1 STRATEGIC FITS BETWEEN COUNTRY TYPE AND US ENGAGEMENT INSTRUMENTS

Country type	Appropriate instruments	Instruments to avoid as primary tool	Lead actors	Strategic objective
Resource-strategic states	DFC financing, commercial diplomacy, industrial partnerships, infrastructure investment, security access as a complement	Humanitarian-only engagement, security access as the sole instrument	DFC; Commerce, Defense, and State Departments	Secure long-term strategic access while aligning with local industrial priorities
Security-fragile states	Limited security cooperation integrated with civilian governance and development support, multilateral diplomacy	Military-first engagement without civilian programs	AFRICOM, State, AU, UN agencies	Contain instability without creating dependency
Institutionally stable partners	Trade agreements, digital infrastructure, university partnerships, technology transfer, MCC compacts	Counterterrorism-heavy security engagement	US Trade Representative, Commerce, MCC, universities, private sector	Build durable long-horizon influence and economic integration

DIPLOMATIC COORDINATION

Diplomacy applies across all three country categories but serves different purposes in each. In resource-strategic states, the State Department's Bureau of African Affairs should facilitate commercial partnerships and address governance concerns on a separate track. In institutionally stable states, diplomacy should focus on trade agreements, digital governance, and common positions in multilateral institutions, since these governments can implement complex agreements and have a direct interest in the rules governing trade, investment, and technology. In security-fragile states, bilateral diplomacy should be supplemented by the African Union (AU), regional organizations, and the United Nations where they have greater access or political legitimacy. Because the AU's limited resources and uneven effectiveness make it unsuitable as the principal channel in every crisis, the diplomatic mix should depend on which institution has the access, capacity, and legitimacy to influence the conflict.

PRIVATE SECTOR FACILITATION

Private sector facilitation is most valuable where viable projects are held back by risks private capital will not absorb alone. In resource-strategic states, the DFC can cover those risks through loans, guarantees, political-risk insurance, and equity. Its expanded 2025 authorities and recent critical-minerals commitments in the DRC show a shift toward mineral production and supply chain access.³² US-backed projects should now also support local processing and value creation where host governments prioritize them. In institutionally stable partners, where private capital is more available, DFC intervention should be narrower and limited to specific regulatory or political risks. In security-fragile states, persistent insecurity limits what risk mitigation can achieve, so these instruments should be used selectively.

SECURITY COOPERATION

Security cooperation remains necessary in Africa, but its role varies by country context. In security-fragile states, United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) assistance should be paired with civilian programs addressing political exclusion, weak institutions, economic marginalization, and judicial capacity. The Sahel shows why military assistance alone is insufficient, since tactical gains have repeatedly failed to produce durable stability where governance and legitimacy remained weak.³³ In resource-strategic states such as Djibouti, security cooperation serves both American and partner interests but should sit alongside commercial, diplomatic, and educational engagement. In institutionally stable partners, it should focus on professional military education, interoperability, peacekeeping, and institutional capacity.

HUMANITARIAN AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMING

The US Agency for International Development's (USAID) dissolution in 2025 removed much of the civilian implementation capacity behind US development programs, and remaining global-health functions moved to the State Department.³⁴ In security-fragile states, humanitarian assistance should therefore rely on UN agencies and other established organizations with operational capacity on the ground, with the World Bank supporting reconstruction and institution building. After the 2025 stop-work order, PEPFAR would benefit from multiyear

funding that gives partner governments and implementers greater predictability. In institutionally stable countries, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) model offers a better template where countries are eligible. Partner governments set development priorities and lead implementation through local institutions, while MCC provides financing, technical oversight, and accountability.³⁵ In resource-strategic states, commercial investment in minerals and infrastructure still requires a development component in host communities. The DFC can finance the investment but cannot replace USAID's former community-development capacity, so US-backed projects should incorporate local employment, community investment, and institutional-capacity commitments, with multilateral development institutions supplying complementary programming where appropriate.

ACADEMIC EXCHANGE AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Academic exchange is a long-horizon instrument because its effects continue after the formal period of study or training ends. Fulbright evaluations show that participants maintain professional relationships formed during their exchanges and apply knowledge gained abroad to their later work.³⁶ These programs are most valuable when they support sustained exchange among institutions and professionals, and alumni networks extend those relationships into durable channels for collaboration. In institutionally stable partners, Fulbright, YALI, and related programs can deepen collaboration among universities, public institutions, businesses, and civil-society organizations. African participants gain research access, professional networks, and institutional experience, while American institutions gain sustained engagement with professionals who understand local political, economic, and social conditions.

In resource-strategic states, exchanges should respond to priorities identified by partner countries. Programs in mining regulation, energy policy, infrastructure, and public finance can support professionals working on questions central to national development while connecting American institutions to expertise they would otherwise lack. The objective should be institutional collaboration around shared problems. In security-fragile states, exchanges can preserve professional and institutional relationships when formal government cooperation is disrupted. Partnerships among universities, civil society, journalists, and public sector professionals keep channels of knowledge and cooperation open through political instability

THREE OPERATING PRINCIPLES

The five instruments described above depend on three broader principles governing how they are selected, combined, and sustained. The first concerns the relationship between strategic assessment and resource allocation; the second addresses coordination among instruments and agencies; and the third concerns whether commitments endure long enough to produce the outcomes they are designed to achieve. Together, these principles address structural features of US-Africa policy that can weaken otherwise well-designed forms of engagement.

The first principle is that instrument selection should precede resource allocation. US foreign-assistance funding is divided among statutory and appropriations accounts that permit some reprogramming but place limits on transfers across accounts and, in many cases, require congressional notification.³⁷ Once resources have been allocated, these constraints can make substantial strategic reorientation difficult even when circumstances change. A multiyear Africa engagement strategy should therefore precede annual budget formulation, identifying the principal strategic characteristics of different partners, the instruments appropriate to them, and the time horizons over which those instruments are expected to work. The NSC and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) should use that assessment to coordinate executive branch budget priorities, with relevant congressional committees engaged early enough for appropriations to reflect the strategy rather than constrain it after the fact.

The second principle is that instrument combinations should be deliberately managed. The cases examined here show that individual instruments often depend on complementary forms of engagement: Diplomacy can create access for commercial partnerships but cannot provide financing; security cooperation can address immediate threats without resolving the political and economic conditions that sustain instability; and private investment can deepen bilateral economic ties but may require diplomatic support where regulatory or political risks are high. The framework requires an additional question about whether the instruments being deployed together actually fit the strategic characteristics of the partner country. NSC staff responsible for Africa should conduct that cross-agency review, identify gaps or contradictions in implementation, and resolve disagreements that individual agencies cannot address within their own mandates. Existing processes do not perform this review because annual budgets allocate within accounts and documents such as the *2022 US Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa* without ranking instruments.³⁸ The review requires no new statute, since the National Security Act already assigns the NSC the task of integrating foreign and military policy.

The third principle is that the duration of a commitment should match the time required for it to produce results. Academic exchange, health partnerships, trade arrangements, and major commercial investments often generate their most important returns over periods longer than a single budget or electoral cycle, although the appropriate mechanism for protecting continuity differs across instruments. The disruption of PEPFAR implementation in 2025 and the dissolution of USAID demonstrated how quickly implementation capacity can change, while AGOA's 2025 expiration, retroactive renewal, and subsequent extension through 2028 exposed businesses and partner governments to repeated uncertainty.³⁹ Longer authorization periods, multiyear funding where appropriate, and institutional arrangements that can survive changes of administration would give partners greater confidence that commitments requiring long-term planning will remain credible. Temporal coherence is therefore part of instrument design itself rather than an assumption that can be made once a program begins.

IMPLICATIONS: WHAT IS AT STAKE FOR THE US AND ITS PARTNERS?

The strategic costs of reduced US engagement in Africa vary according to the country, the instrument withdrawn, and the interests at stake. A reduction in security cooperation may have limited consequences in one context, while the loss of commercial access, institutional relationships, or supply chain positions elsewhere may be difficult to reverse. The relevant distinction is therefore among costs that compound over time, costs that remain significant but recoverable, and costs that the United States can absorb without materially weakening its strategic position.

The most difficult-to-reverse costs arise where relationships and infrastructure accumulate over long periods. Critical-mineral supply chains illustrate this problem. The Trump administration has identified foreign mineral dependence as a national security risk and pursued domestic production, seabed development, and international partnerships to diversify supply.⁴⁰ Yet the United States remains heavily dependent on foreign sources for many critical minerals, while China dominates refining across much of the sector.⁴¹ In the DRC, Chinese firms operated or financed fifteen of the country's nineteen cobalt mines in 2024.⁴² As extraction rights, processing capacity, transport infrastructure, and commercial relationships become established around existing suppliers, diversification becomes progressively more expensive. Prolonged disengagement therefore raises the cost of later American entry into supply chains already structured around other partners.

Academic and professional exchange produces a different form of cumulative effect. China has invested for decades in educational relationships with African countries, while African students have used Chinese universities to pursue their own academic, professional, and commercial goals.⁴³ Long interruptions in American exchange reduce opportunities for African and American professionals to develop comparable networks and institutional familiarity. They also narrow the range of partnerships available to African participants seeking access to different institutions, professional communities, and sources of expertise. Because these relationships develop through sustained contact, they cannot be re-created immediately after a prolonged absence.

A second category consists of significant costs that still permit reentry. Development finance, digital governance, and mineral contracting remain open to renegotiation as African governments pursue their own priorities and evaluate competing partnerships. Consistent participation gives external partners greater influence over how these arrangements develop, while episodic engagement weakens that position. However, because regulatory and contractual frameworks can change with governments, markets, and political coalitions, disengagement does not necessarily foreclose future American participation.

The central Sahel presents a similar case. Western security partnerships with Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso contracted sharply after military coups and deteriorating political relations, while Russia expanded its role through the Wagner mercenary group and, subsequently,

the Africa Corps.⁴⁴ Russian involvement has not produced durable stabilization. In Mali, the militant group Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) intensified pressure on transportation routes in 2025 and imposed a fuel blockade that disrupted supplies to Bamako, while insecurity also worsened in Burkina Faso and Niger.⁴⁵ These developments suggest that Russia's expanded position is neither uncontested nor necessarily permanent. Future American engagement remains possible, although a renewed approach would need to address the political and institutional conditions that security assistance alone has failed to resolve.

Trade and development relationships are also recoverable, although interruptions impose real costs on both African and American partners. AGOA expired in September 2025, was restored retroactively in February 2026, and was subsequently extended through the end of 2028.⁴⁶ Reauthorization preserved preferential market access, but repeated uncertainty complicates long-term investment decisions by firms and governments on both sides. Confidence affected by the 2025 disruption of PEPFAR and the dissolution of USAID can likewise be rebuilt, provided future commitments give partner governments and implementing organizations greater predictability.⁴⁷

Finally, some reductions in engagement carry manageable strategic costs. Countries with less direct relevance to critical minerals, strategic geography, transnational security, or major commercial relationships do not require the same range of instruments deployed in higher-priority contexts. The United States can maintain diplomatic relations and targeted cooperation while concentrating more resource-intensive engagement where the consequences of withdrawal are greater. This prioritization does not diminish humanitarian needs, which should continue to be addressed through appropriate bilateral, multilateral, and humanitarian channels.

A Chinese-funded project warrants an American response where it bears on interests the United States shares with its partner, such as secure supply chains, critical infrastructure, technological standards, or regional security, and where the partner government wants an alternative. Elsewhere, matching it project for project would consume resources without serving either side, and African governments remain free to pursue it with the partners they choose. Calibrated engagement therefore concentrates sustained presence where American and African interests converge and accepts a smaller footprint elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

The cases examined in this brief show that the effectiveness of US engagement with Africa depends on how well particular instruments fit the strategic characteristics of particular partners and whether those commitments endure long enough to produce results. In the DRC, recent commercial and minerals initiatives are correcting a long period in which American engagement did not match the country's resource-strategic importance, but they enter a sector where Chinese firms have already accumulated substantial advantages. In Nigeria, security and governance concerns continue to receive stronger high-level coordination than

the country's wider economic, demographic, and technological significance warrants. In Djibouti, an essential military relationship has carried disproportionate weight while commercial, diplomatic, and professional ties have remained comparatively limited.

These cases point toward a more calibrated selective-engagement strategy. As table 1 shows, resource-strategic states require commercial diplomacy, investment financing, and partnerships that also respond to local development priorities. Security-fragile states require security cooperation integrated with civilian and institutional measures suited to the political conditions sustaining instability. Institutionally stable partners offer greater scope for long-term trade, technology, investment, and academic relationships. Across all three categories, strategic assessment should guide resource allocation, complementary instruments should be coordinated deliberately, and commitments should be designed around the time required for them to produce results.

This approach also clarifies where restraint is appropriate. Chinese activity does not require an American response in every country or sector, and some reductions in US engagement carry manageable strategic costs. Other forms of disengagement become progressively more costly as supply chains, infrastructure, institutional relationships, and professional networks deepen over time, making later reentry more difficult and limiting opportunities to build mutually beneficial partnerships. A credible US strategy therefore depends on identifying where long-term engagement serves clear American and African interests, choosing instruments suited to those contexts, and sustaining them with enough consistency for partners on both sides to plan around the relationship.

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Preferred citation: Gift Iyioku, "Recalibrating Selective Engagement in US-Africa Relations," Hoover History Lab Policy Brief no. 2605, Hoover Institution, October 2026.

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