

Africa's Moment of Choice: Partnership or Exploitation

By Mavinga Mwene

Introduction

In May 1897, John Langalibalele Dube—a 26-year-old Black man from the British colony of Natal, southern Africa —ascended the podium at Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute at the invitation of Booker T. Washington, founder of the historically black college and university (HBCU) located in Alabama.

Few in the audience could have known that this young visitor would become a pivotal figure in Africa's struggle for self-determination, founding the African National Congress (ANC), the continent's oldest political party. Dube's prophetic speech called upon the graduating class to confront the deeper meaning of Black liberation, a meaning shaped by his reading of Washington, already regarded as the "apostle of Black industrial education."

Booker T. Washington, born enslaved in 1856, was freed after the Civil War and, by age 25, founded Tuskegee, a pioneering Black educational institution. Over the next two decades, he emerged as the foremost Black social and educational reformer, articulating a philosophy of self-reliance in his seminal work *Up from Slavery*.

Dube found in Washington's vision a model for human dignity and development for African peoples through self-reliance. After more than a decade in America, he returned to Natal, an ordained Congregationalist minister, carrying with him the blueprint for social transformation. In 1901, he founded the Ohlange Institute, the first educational institution founded by a Black South African. Modeled after Tuskegee's curriculum of practical skills, vocational training, and economic self-reliance, Ohlange became a beacon of resilience and autonomy to a colonized people.



John Langalibalele Dube (center), the first president of the African National Congress (ANC), and the 'Booker T. Washington of South Africa' pictured with fellow leaders during the organization's formation on January 8, 1912, in Bloemfontein, South Africa. Image source: Wikipedia, Public Domain

With Washington's endorsement and a letter of support, Dube raised funds in the U.S. before returning to establish Ohlange. So profound was Washington's influence that Dube became known as the "Washington of South Africa." Building on this foundation, Dube and fellow intellectuals founded the South African Native National Congress in 1912, later renamed the ANC.

Transatlantic links between African Americans and Africans laid the groundwork for a century of Black solidarity and political progress and helped shape African liberation ideologies.

When U.S. administrations recognized these ties, they strengthened U.S.-Africa relations. President John F. Kennedy stands out. Rather than conceding Africa to Cold War geopolitics, he envisioned a relationship rooted in shared cultural ties, reformist energy, and mutual respect.

Today, in a multi-polar world increasingly defined by the rise of great and regional powers, where ambition stretches across borders and oceans, until checked, a second Trump presidency presents African leaders an opportunity to deepen engagement with their American counterparts, leveraging shared values to foster goodwill and secure the peace and prosperity that is the birthright of every African child who dreams of a brighter future.

Africa's Moment of Choice

As Africa looks to the future, the question is no longer whether it will rise, but how—and with whom. Will the continent's next chapter be written through reciprocal partnerships grounded in shared history and mutual empowerment, or through transactional arrangements that undermine self-reliance? The answer depends on the choices African leaders make today, and the alternatives presented by their global partners.

For most of Africa today, decades of independence movements, political struggles, and civil rights achievements have created the conditions and expectations for transformative leadership. This moment, rich with the potential for an African Renaissance, offers an unprecedented opportunity for cultural, artistic, and technological innovation—a renaissance rooted in wisdom and vision, promising economic empowerment and shared prosperity with Africa's natural allies, bound by shared history and mutual interests.

Africa's economic trajectory highlights both the promise and peril of this moment.

In the early 2000s, barely a decade after the Cold War ended, Africa entered what many hailed as its “growth years.” Surging global demand for commodities, improved governance, and increased foreign direct investment fueled remarkable GDP growth. The “Africa Rising” narrative captivated global audiences and drew Western companies eager to tap into a new middle class.

However, growth began to stagnate in the mid-2010s. Declining commodity prices, structural inefficiencies, and rising debt exposed the fragility of many African economies. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened these vulnerabilities, revealing the risks of a model overly reliant on commodity exports and external financing.

Amid this turbulence, China emerged as Africa's dominant economic partner. Through loans and infrastructure investments under the banner of “South-South cooperation,” China presented itself as a fellow developing power and BRICS ally. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) marketed its rapid industrialization as a non-Western model for African development.

That narrative warrants scrutiny.

China's development was not homegrown. It emerged through deep cooperation with American advisors, companies, and policymakers. After Nixon's opening of China, U.S. corporations built supply chains, helped China enter the World Trade Organization, and facilitated access to capital, markets, and technology.

This U.S.-China cooperation approach contrasts sharply with the way China engages with Africa, and unfortunately, how most African governments deal with China.

While Chinese investments have built roads, ports, and railways across the continent, these often come with conditions that exclude local labor, displace African industries, and ensure that the bulk of loaned funds flow back to China while sidelining the development of African human capital.

Furthermore, African economies are steered into roles as exporters of raw materials for Chinese industries, rather than fostering local value chains and industrialization.

What China, cloaked in the rhetoric of solidarity with the former-colonized states, presents as a model for African development is a geopolitical bait-and-switch worthy of a resurgent feudal Middle Kingdom. By deceptively framing its economic transformation as independent of American tutelage, the CCP offers African states the promise of self-empowerment—at a price.

Flush with dollars from cheaply-made, exploitative labor products sold to the West, the CCP channels funds to African states, establishing a system designed to entrench dependency on Chinese goods, expertise, and debt.

The U.S. Model — A Partnership for Empowerment

The United States' Marshall Plan in Europe and its post-World War II reconstruction efforts in Japan embedded knowledge transfer and capacity-building into development strategies. This wasn't merely an incidental outcome but a deliberate globalization of a core American belief: that free yet regulated markets form the foundation for human prosperity and freedom. When individuals are liberated from the fear of government coercion and empowered to compete robustly, whether through ideas, goods, or services, the result is human flourishing on a scale unparalleled in history.

By sharing technical expertise, democratic governance models, and industrial best practices, the U.S. empowered nations like Germany and Japan to achieve self-reliance and sustained economic growth. This same approach offers a compelling blueprint for U.S. engagement with Africa, one that could be further amplified through deeper ties between Black America and Africa.

The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), Prosper Africa, and the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) illustrate the transformative potential of U.S.-Africa economic collaboration. AGOA, championed by the Congressional Black Caucus and signed into law in 2000, has facilitated U.S.-Africa trade by granting duty-free access to U.S. markets, creating jobs, and fostering regional economic integration.

Prosper Africa and the DFC have similarly redefined U.S.-Africa relations, most notably through the Lobito Corridor initiative. Connecting Angola to Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, this \$4 billion infrastructure project—the largest U.S. investment in Africa's history—represents a paradigm shift from aid dependency to infrastructure-led trade and development. This initiative not only exemplifies America's capacity to build but also positions the U.S. as a counterweight to China's growing trade dominance in Africa.

During Donald Trump's first administration, groundwork was laid for a new kind of engagement with Africa, one that emphasized trade, investment, and self-reliance over paternalistic aid. As Trump begins his second term, the U.S. is poised to accelerate its focus on U.S.-Africa economic partnerships, challenging China's transactional and often exploitative approach to global trade.

Drawing inspiration from the life and teachings of Booker T. Washington—a fellow Republican and builder—Trump emerges as the first U.S. President since John F. Kennedy uniquely positioned to advocate for a bold trade and investment agenda that prioritizes Africa's self-reliance and development. This vision aligns naturally with the values of U.S. faith leaders, Black entrepreneurs,

and African counterparts who share a common commitment to empowering communities and fostering long-term prosperity. It is a scenario that neither China nor Russia, with their extractive and victimhood-oriented narratives of “collective West” exploitation, is eager to confront.

The Lobito Corridor exemplifies this deeper engagement, serving as a critical infrastructure link to enhance trade and regional connectivity across Angola, Zambia, and the DRC. Such projects underscore not only the vast economic potential of U.S.-Africa partnerships but also the enduring historical ties between the American and African peoples.

Diaspora, Faith, and Institutional Networks

Black American entrepreneurs and institutions have the potential to play a transformative role in fostering U.S.-Africa partnerships.

Drawing inspiration from Booker T. Washington’s enduring legacy of economic independence and self-reliance, Black entrepreneurs could catalyze partnerships rooted in shared heritage and mutual prosperity.

Washington’s assertion that “at the bottom of education, politics, and religion must be economic independence” remains as relevant today as it was a century ago. However, for this vision to materialize, Black American entrepreneurs must take a more active role in driving investment, fostering innovation, and building the social and economic linkages that empower both continents.

The U.S. government should play an active role in supporting such initiatives, and all other values-driven American enterprises interested in forging business agreements with their African counterparts.

By simply lending its capacity and knowledge power, and assisting the American private sector mitigate risks, the U.S. government will create a business environment that all but guarantees a ROI in terms of mutual economic benefits and U.S.-Africa relations.

The African Union has formally recognized the African diaspora as the “sixth region” of the continent, a move that underscores the growing importance of engaging the global African community. The U.S. government should develop a strategic framework to engage with the African Union and its diaspora commission. This framework would harness the social, cultural, and commercial capital of Black Americans and first-generation African Americans to advance President Trump’s vision of shared U.S.-Africa prosperity within the broader context of a collective Global West.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have played a critical role in educating generations of African leaders and could serve as vital hubs for U.S.-Africa collaboration. These institutions can foster educational exchanges, professional networks, and shared development goals, linking African states with Black American cultural, commercial, and civic organizations. Such partnerships would amplify the influence of HBCUs in global development while advancing mutual prosperity.

Social networks and communal organizations also hold immense potential for fostering innovation and creative problem-solving. In the United States, Black Greek-letter organizations—fraternities and sororities—have been among the most enduring and consequential social institutions. Many influential African leaders who studied at HBCUs became members of these organizations, which significantly shaped their leadership philosophies.

This legacy underscores that Africa and Black America are bound by more than the existential nostalgia of ancestral origins. Their shared history is rooted not just in the tragedy of the transatlantic slave trade but in a collective effort to liberate and empower marginalized communities. This shared mission—emphasizing agency, self-worth, and purpose—continues to drive their collective progress.

Drawing on the Jewish Diaspora-Israel Model

U.S.-Africa relations can also draw inspiration from Israel’s pragmatic approach to engaging its diaspora and Africa. Israel, forged by the collective will of Jews worldwide, demonstrates how shared heritage and history can be engines of economic and cultural progress. Partnerships with Morocco and Ethiopia—two ancient diaspora homes for Jews—blend cultural preservation with strategic diplomacy. Morocco’s restoration of historic synagogues and its leadership in the Abraham Accords show how shared history can redefine relationships. Ethiopia, with its vibrant Jewish community and direct air links to Israel, highlights the potential of cultural and economic synergy.

South African Jews offer another compelling example of diaspora engagement. They played a critical role in both the founding of Israel and the advancement of civil rights in South Africa, standing at the intersection of Jewish solidarity and African liberation. Their legacy reinforces the idea that diaspora communities can act as bridges between nations, fostering mutual understanding and progress.

The Abraham Accords, built on shared values and historical memory, reveal the power of pragmatic and transformative diplomacy.

Similarly, Israel’s international development initiatives, pioneered by Golda Meir—the embodiment of the principles of learning and labor, if ever there was one—illustrate how investments in mutual capacity-building reinforce trust and self-reliance.

For the U.S., this model offers a compelling blueprint for U.S.-Africa relations: partnerships rooted in empowerment, shared values, and historical understanding are those that endure.

Africa’s David Generation

As the people of Africa seek to navigate the path from politics to prosperity, the need for visionary development conscious leadership becomes increasingly evident. Too many leaders have failed to transition their nations from protest and politics to peace and prosperity.

Rising expectations have exposed the limitations of leaders skilled at solving outdated problems but unprepared to address contemporary challenges. Under mounting pressure, some have turned to corruption, nepotism, and scapegoating—shifting blame to immigrants, ethnic groups, or external forces to deflect from their failures.

In such environments, the geo-political and economic interests of the China Communist Party and the survival instincts of entrenched yet increasingly ineffectual post-colonial political elites of far too many African countries becomes evident.

Chinese investment projects serve a double benefit for such African leaders. In return for preferential concessions or monopoly deals, captive markets for cheap Chinese goods, and the prospects of obtaining a 'staunch ally' in the form of a wholly indebted semi-client state, the Chinese development projects, with their grand scale and visual impact, create an illusion of progress that can momentarily placate even the most vocal critics of the state, providing outdated leaders a temporary reprieve from public dissatisfaction, plus the added allure of Chinese-derived financial kickbacks.

But this isn't the only story coming out of Africa. A different path is emerging—one demonstrated by states that have embraced disciplined, technocratic governance, prioritizing reform, accountability, and long-term development.

If U.S.-Africa relations are to prosper, strengthening trade ties with African success stories such as Rwanda, Ethiopia, Ghana, Uganda, Kenya, and Botswana is essential. These states, with their focus on governance, reform, and long-term development, offer a foundation for collaboration that prioritizes empowerment over dependency, setting the stage for shared growth and stability.

In fact, young people across Africa—as noted by the 2024 African Youth Survey—are “urging politicians and decision-makers across the region to tackle corruption, improve employment prospects, act on climate change, navigate global influence with caution, and create a more prosperous economic climate for young people.” By embracing a shared vision of prosperity rooted in the aspirations of Africans, particularly its younger population, the African Diaspora and the common links between U.S. and Africa and their allies, we can forge a new “David Generation,” as envisioned by Thabo Mbeki’s African Renaissance. This vision—of flourishing arts, trade, and ingenuity—is no longer a distant ideal but a tangible goal. Through strategic partnerships and disciplined leadership, America and Africa can create a future defined by shared success and collective advancement. The time for protest has passed; the time for building has come.

Africa’s Strategic Choice: Partnership or Exploitation

On April 27, 1994, Nelson Mandela stood at the Ohlange Institute, a symbol of Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee-inspired Black South Africa, as he cast his vote in the country’s first democratic elections. After voting, Mandela visited the grave of John Dube, the ANC’s first president and a founding father of the nation, declaring, “Mr. President, I have come to report to you that South Africa is free today.”

This moment embodied the ANC’s decades-long struggle for justice, guided by Mr. Dube’s philosophy of self-reliance, resilience, and solidarity with the Black diaspora. Dube envisioned

South Africa as an integral part of the global Western world, contributing to a thriving democratic order. Mandela's reconciliation efforts laid the foundation for a multi-racial democracy, leaving the ANC to fulfill Dube's vision of prosperity and self-reliance.

However, thirty years later, President Ramaphosa's government has alienated historical Western partners by deepening ties with anti-Western powers. Over the past year, South Africa strengthened military cooperation with Russia, welcomed Iranian officials, expanded opaque trade with China, and avoided condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The ANC further polarized its position by filing genocide charges against Israel at the International Court of Justice while intensifying pro-Palestinian rhetoric.

Domestically and internationally, statements like Ramaphosa's declaration that "Palestine will be free from the river to the sea" have drawn sharp criticism for aligning with a narrative at odds with South Africa's democratic values.

In December 2024, U.S. Senator Tim Scott (Republican-South Carolina), a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and ranking member of the subcommittee on Africa and Global Health Policy, led calls for then-President-elect Donald Trump to reconsider trade agreements with South Africa unless the ANC realigned its foreign policy.

The irony is stark: while South Africa's founder saw himself and his nation in solidarity with America, and part of a larger community of shared values, today's ANC risks jeopardizing that historic alignment.

South Africa's alliances with autocratic regimes are also increasingly disconnected from its people. As a majority Christian nation, South Africans are unlikely to support ties with a theocracy like Iran, where Christians face systemic persecution. Similarly, South Africa's deep cultural ties to the U.S.—a diverse, English-speaking democracy with millions of Black citizens—suggest that stronger partnerships with the West align more naturally with its future trajectory, as has been obviously demonstrated since 1897.

In contrast, nations like Kenya, Botswana, Ghana, and Morocco have demonstrated how alignment with the global West can foster development and stability. Their partnerships have yielded better governance, robust economic growth, and tangible benefits for their citizens. Whether the ANC reconsiders its direction or continues its current path will define South Africa's role on the global stage.

The larger question, however, extends beyond South Africa. It is a challenge for all African nations: Who are we, and where do we belong in a world of shifting power? The decisions African leaders make now will determine whether their nations emerge as sovereign contributors to a global West rooted in progress, democracy, and innovation—or fall prey to external ambitions that undermine their independence, disregard their history, and treat them as mere tools for resource extraction and geopolitical advantage.

A Robust Partnership Based on Mutual Respect and Shared Aspirations

On January 20, 2025, Donald J. Trump was sworn in for a second, nonconsecutive term as President of the United States, marking a pivotal moment for the nation and the world. His victory marked a historic shift in political identity. Garnering the largest share of Latino and Black votes of any Republican candidate in modern history. This reflected a growing preference among Black Americans for a politics centered on empowerment, self-reliance, and collaboration— “let’s do deals together”—over dependency narratives.

Globally, reactions to Mr. Trump’s election revealed a similar dynamic. Just as his presidency signals a turning point in U.S. domestic policy and political culture, many Africans are anticipating an end to a U.S. foreign policy dominated by liberal interventionism. This approach, too often focused on imposing external values with little tangible benefit in return, may give way to a more pragmatic and mutually beneficial framework, with profound implications for U.S.-Africa relations.

A significant number of Africans hoped for and proudly celebrated Trump’s victory. They saw it as a repudiation of a system that treated their nations not as partners but as perpetual wards, always at risk of being deemed failures under a narrowly defined and mandated universal order of American liberal values—encompassing all aspects of social, political, legal, and governance structures. Under this framework, compliance with these values determined the degree of aid—rather than trade—that would be offered, with noncompliance met by chastisement or the threat of sanctions.

The resonance between MAGA and Africa’s aspirations for self-determination becomes clear. Trump’s emphasis on civic nationalism at home calls for pragmatism abroad, rejecting moralistic impositions in both cases, offered a refreshing alternative to the postwar liberal orthodoxy. This orthodoxy, which had long outgrown its utility, reduced international relations and, increasingly, domestic politics to a battleground for enforcing liberal dominance.

Yet, as the postwar ‘rules-based’ system weakens under the weight of emerging great and mid-level powers, and with the Trump administration momentarily focused on restructuring the administrative state, alignments rooted in shared interests and values have become that much more important—and for responsible African leaders, essential.

In theory, neutrality offers African states the promise of independence and strategic flexibility. In practice, however, such arrangements of convenience without even the pretense of shared values or commitment, devolve into purely transactional relations on both sides.

As the Greek historian Thucydides warned over 2,400 years ago in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, leaders should approach sustained interactions between states with deliberate foresight. What one state perceives as neutrality, after several exchanges and interactions, may be viewed by another as an implied commitment. That other state could be a former transactional partner, or it could be a rival, perceiving you either as an ally or as a competitor. Neutrality is often hardwired into a state’s geopolitical location and rooted in its historical origins.

Neutrality is one thing; playing both sides is another.

Given the power imbalance between states, nations like China or Russia often exploit African resources and saddle them with unsustainable debt under the guise of neutrality. What begins as

a neutral posture can quickly transform into a de facto passive alliance—or worse, an unwitting proxy—advancing the geopolitical ambitions of China, Russia, or Iran in their competition with the United States and its allies.

The rhetoric of "Global South solidarity," along with Moscow's favored term of the day, "the Collective West," is a modern spin on the East versus West narrative crafted of the Soviet Union. This rhetoric obscures the reality that such relationships overwhelmingly serve the interests of Beijing and Moscow far more than those of Africa.

By contrast, U.S.-Africa relations are rooted in shared history and cultural ties that transcend mere transactions. From the legacy of American missionaries and educators building schools and churches across Africa, to the influence of American civil rights leaders on African liberation movements, and Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute shaping African development, this relationship reflects common principles of faith, self-reliance, and community.

African leaders who neglect this living legacy of global African development within the West—a legacy forged by African and Black American leaders—do a grave disservice to their nations and the future of African youth.

International relations are not solely about politics, politicians, or government-to-government loans. The most enduring relationships stem from social interactions, cultural understanding, and grassroots connections. Thousands of U.S. church groups, mentorships, fellowships, and professional associations form the backbone of lasting ties between the two continents.

Christian, faith-based institutions of higher learning, such as Liberty University, have continued the mission of collaborating with African communities to promote peace while advocating for a U.S.-Africa partnership for prosperity.

In this realm, China, Russia, and Iran are absent, even in the nations of their so-called allies.

The Trump administration should leverage the accumulated U.S.-Africa social capital, not based on where China or Russia is, but on where Americans and Africans have been and continue to be—together, doing the work on the ground, with the people.

The history of U.S.-Africa relations should inspire a robust partnership based on mutual respect and shared aspirations, free of coercion or exploitation. President Trump's return to the White House presents an opportunity to strengthen these ties and chart a new course. The nations that align with America—embracing values of sovereignty, tolerance, and innovation—will find themselves on the right side of history, just as a century ago, America and Africa laid the foundations for progress.

Countries like Rwanda, Botswana, Ghana, Ethiopia, and Uganda show the power of visionary leadership rooted in self-reliance. Leaders like President Kagame of Rwanda exemplify disciplined governance driving sustained growth and rejecting political distractions.

Senegal, Morocco, and Somaliland highlight the social, cultural, and economic contributions of majority-Muslim societies steeped in Sufi Islam. These values, aligned with Western philosophy, bridge cultural divides.

The Trump administration must recognize such leaders and nations as vital partners in constructing a sustainable global order. This alliance must be built on shared values, sovereignty, and peace.

The stakes are high. A multipolar world is marked by insecurity, economic instability, and fragmented states. Yet it offers wise African leaders the opportunity to reclaim their rightful place in the world—not as pawns in geopolitical struggles but as sovereign entities where human flourishing thrives.

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