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Abstract

The study examined United States (US) foreign policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa, with particular attention to the deployment of soft power instruments, the dynamics of great power competition, and the strategic objectives framing US engagement with the continent. The study adopted a qualitative literature-based methodology, drawing on peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, and official policy documents. The analysis was anchored in Joseph Nye's soft power theory and augmented by realist and liberal theoretical frameworks. Findings reveal that US engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa has been shaped by successive administrations through a combination of development aid, trade frameworks, security partnerships, and public diplomacy. The escalating rivalry between the US, China, and Russia in Africa has further reconfigured the strategic rationale of American engagement. The study concludes that for US foreign policy to yield sustainable outcomes in Africa, Washington should transcend the instrumentalization of the continent and embrace genuine partnership premised on African agency and mutually defined priorities. The study recommends United States government should prioritize the renewal and substantive reform of AGOA beyond its current preference-based model, incorporating reciprocal provisions that incentivize African industrial value-addition and align with the AfCFTA integration agenda. Washington should institutionalize its development and health programming in Africa through legislative frameworks and multi-year funding commitments that reduce the vulnerability of these programs to partisan domestic politics, thereby reinforcing the credibility of US soft power. The US should expand multilateral diplomatic engagement with African institutions, including the African Union and the African Development Bank, and ensure that its commercial diplomacy through Prosper Africa and Power Africa initiatives is adequately funded and coordinated across relevant government agencies. US policymakers should incorporate African civil society, diaspora communities, and private sector actors as substantive co-designers of engagement frameworks rather than as secondary consultees, thereby anchoring US policy in African-owned development priorities.

Keywords: *US foreign policy, Sub-Saharan Africa, soft power, great power competition, diplomacy, AGOA, Biden Africa strategy*

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1.0 Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa has historically occupied a secondary position in the hierarchy of United States (US) foreign policy priorities. As Kepe et al. (2023) observe, Africa was a theatre of great power contestation during the Cold War, and it is once again attracting heightened geopolitical attention from the US and its principal competitors, China and Russia. The continent's demographic weight, natural resource endowments, and growing geopolitical influence at multilateral forums have compelled successive US administrations to articulate and periodically revise strategic frameworks for engagement with the region. The renewal of American interest in Sub-Saharan Africa is thus not incidental but is structurally driven by calculations of national interest and global power dynamics.

The concept of soft power, advanced by Joseph Nye, provides an important analytical lens for understanding US engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa. Nye (2004) argues that soft power rests on the ability of a state to attract and co-opt rather than coerce, relying on the appeal of its values, culture, and policies to shape the preferences of other actors. The US has historically leveraged instruments such as development aid, educational exchanges, trade agreements, and public diplomacy to cultivate influence in Africa. However, the effectiveness of these instruments has been increasingly contested amid the expansion of Chinese economic engagement and Russian military presence on the continent (Lohalo et al., 2022).

This paper presents a literature-based analysis of US foreign policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa, with a focus on the role of soft power, the effects of great power competition, and the strategic underpinnings of successive US Africa strategies. The study draws on scholarly literature, institutional reports, and official policy documents to construct a structured review of the subject. The paper is structured as follows: a problem statement outlining the research gap; an articulation of objectives; a theoretical framework; an empirical and theoretical literature review; a conceptual discussion; and a conclusion with policy recommendations.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the articulation of comprehensive policy frameworks by successive US administrations, the strategic engagement between the United States and Sub-Saharan Africa remains inconsistent, episodic, and largely reactive to external pressures rather than grounded in sustained partnership (Tnsr.org, 2024). As Lohalo et al. (2022) document, the rise of China as Africa's largest trading partner and infrastructure financier has fundamentally altered the geopolitical landscape of the continent, forcing the US to reassess the adequacy of its traditional engagement instruments. The US-Africa Leaders Summit held in December 2022, the release of the Biden administration's Africa strategy in August 2022, and the longstanding African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) framework are reflective of Washington's awareness of this challenge. However, structural gaps persist between policy intention and implementation.

Scholarly literature on US-Africa engagement reveals a persistent tension between values-driven objectives, such as democracy promotion and human rights, and interests-based imperatives, including counterterrorism cooperation, access to strategic minerals, and the containment of Chinese influence (Tnsr.org, 2024). This dual orientation creates policy incoherence that undermines the credibility of US engagement on the continent. Furthermore, African leaders have consistently called for a shift from aid-dependency frameworks to genuine trade and investment partnerships, a demand that US policy has only partially addressed (CSIS, 2025). The problem, therefore, lies in identifying the degree to which US soft power instruments have been effective and what structural reconfigurations are necessary to sustain American influence in Sub-Saharan Africa in a competitive geopolitical environment.

2.0 Literature Review

The concept of soft power has been extensively theorized in the international relations literature as a critical instrument of US foreign engagement. Nye (2004) formally defined soft power as the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion, with culture, political values, and legitimate foreign policies constituting its primary sources. Wilson and Krasner (2010) build on this framework by arguing that for soft power to be effective, states must communicate in a functioning marketplace of ideas, persuade targets to alter attitudes on relevant political issues, and ensure that changed attitudes translate into concrete policy outcomes. Applied to Africa, this model suggests that US soft power tools must navigate an information environment increasingly shaped by Chinese media and Russian disinformation.

Scholarly debate has also engaged the limitations of soft power as an analytical and policy concept. Critics argue that the separation between soft and hard power is analytically tenuous, since economic inducements, military capacity building, and development aid contain elements of both co-optive attraction and material conditionality. Nye himself later articulated the notion of smart power, which combines hard and soft power resources strategically depending on the context of application (Nye, 2004; Wilson and Krasner, 2010). For US Africa policy, this implies that the most effective engagement frameworks integrate diplomacy, development financing, security cooperation, and trade facilitation into a coherent and synergistic strategy rather than relying on any single instrument.

Realist scholarship, drawing on the classical tradition of Waltz (2010) and the offensive realism of Mearsheimer, frames US engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa as fundamentally driven by great power competition. From this vantage point, the intensification of US diplomacy toward Africa under the Biden administration, including three continental visits by Secretary of State Blinken within a single year, reflects not a values-based transformation but a strategic response to China's growing economic and political footprint (Brookings Institution, 2022). The realist framework thus cautions against an overly idealistic reading of stated US policy goals and directs attention to the material interests and power calculations that animate American engagement.

Empirical scholarship on US-Africa engagement has traced the evolution of American strategy across successive administrations. The Obama administration's 2012 Presidential Policy Directive on Sub-Saharan Africa articulated four strategic pillars: strengthening democratic institutions, spurring economic growth and trade, advancing peace and security, and promoting opportunity and development (Obama White House Archives, 2012). These pillars reflected a liberal internationalist orientation and positioned Africa as a partner in democratic consolidation rather than merely a recipient of humanitarian assistance. However, scholars have noted that the resources committed to implementing this strategy fell short of its rhetorical ambitions, limiting its practical impact on the ground.

The Trump administration's Africa policy, articulated in 2018 by National Security Advisor John Bolton, shifted emphasis toward economic competition with China and Russia, framing

African engagement through an explicitly transactional lens. Prosper Africa, a flagship initiative launched under the Trump administration, was designed to facilitate two-way trade and investment between the US and African countries by coordinating US government support for private sector transactions (McCaul and Murphy, 2022). While the initiative introduced important institutional infrastructure for commercial diplomacy, critics noted that its implementation was uneven and insufficiently funded to match the scale of Chinese Belt and Road investments on the continent (Carnegie Endowment, 2024).

The Biden administration released its comprehensive US Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa in August 2022, outlining four strategic objectives: fostering openness and open societies; delivering democratic and security dividends; advancing pandemic recovery and economic opportunity; and supporting conservation, climate adaptation, and just energy transition (White House, 2022). Analysts at the Brookings Institution (2022) characterized this strategy as a significant rhetorical and diplomatic reset, noting that Secretary Blinken's three visits to Africa within ten months represented unprecedented engagement by a US cabinet official. The strategy explicitly acknowledged the need to treat African nations as equal partners rather than as instruments of US geopolitical objectives, a departure in tone from previous administrations' approaches.

The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), enacted in 2000 and periodically renewed, has been the cornerstone of US trade policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa. AGOA provides duty-free access to the US market for over 6,800 eligible products from qualifying sub-Saharan African countries, functioning simultaneously as a trade and development instrument (Runde, 2024). According to data from the United States Trade Representative, AGOA imports into the US in 2021 totaled US$6.7 billion, representing an increase from US$4.2 billion in 2020, reflecting post-pandemic recovery in African export capacity. However, scholars and policymakers have consistently noted that AGOA's utilization rates remain low and unevenly distributed across eligible countries, with a limited number of economies capturing the bulk of its trade benefits.

Empirical research on the comparative dimensions of US and Chinese engagement in Africa has enriched understanding of the competitive dynamics shaping American policy. Lohalo et al. (2022) argue that the US-China competition in Africa is characterized by strategic ambiguity, in that the two powers simultaneously compete and cooperate across different issue areas, including climate change, nuclear nonproliferation, and peacekeeping. By 2024, Africa's trade in goods with China had risen to US$295 billion, compared to US$72 billion with the United States, reflecting a yawning gap in commercial engagement (CSIS, 2025). This disparity underscores the limits of soft power instruments alone in addressing the material dimensions of Africa's engagement with competing great powers.

The geopolitical literature also highlights the growing Russian presence in Africa, particularly through military cooperation, mercenary operations, and disinformation campaigns. Kepe et al. (2023) identify the intersection of great power competition in Africa as a critical variable that the US must navigate in designing its engagement strategy. The US Institute of Peace (2022) observes that African leaders retain vivid memory of Cold War proxy conflicts on their continent and are therefore wary of being drawn into contemporary great power rivalries. This historical wariness constrains the US ability to frame its engagement as categorically different from the extractive or coercive involvement of competing powers, necessitating sustained investments in legitimacy and genuine partnership.

Scholarship on US soft power in Africa has engaged the role of health diplomacy as a distinctive instrument of American influence. The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), launched under the George W. Bush administration and sustained across subsequent presidencies, has been widely acknowledged as one of the most impactful US public health investments in Africa. According to Rahim et al. (2025), the suspension of USAID operations and threats to global health programming under successive administrative shifts have significantly threatened the institutional foundations of US soft power in Africa, jeopardizing public health gains across 47 sub-Saharan African countries. These developments underscore the fragility of soft power instruments when they are subject to domestic political volatility.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Joseph Nye's soft power theory as its primary theoretical framework. According to Nye (2004), soft power constitutes the capacity of a state to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or inducement. The three principal sources of soft power, as Nye identifies, are a state's culture, its political values, and its foreign policies when these are seen as legitimate and possessing moral authority. The relevance of this framework to US-Africa relations is evident in the instruments Washington employs: educational exchange programs, foreign aid, public diplomacy initiatives, trade preferences under AGOA, and health interventions under PEPFAR.

Realist theory offers a complementary lens for understanding the strategic calculations underlying US policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa. Realism posits that states operate in an anarchic international system and are primarily driven by security and power considerations (Waltz, 2010). From a realist perspective, US engagement with Africa is less about genuine partnership and more about securing strategic interests: access to natural resources, containment of rival great powers, and maintenance of a favorable balance of power. As Kepe et al. (2023) demonstrate, the US strategic pivot toward Africa is substantially motivated by the imperative to counter expanding Chinese and Russian influence on the continent.

Liberal internationalist theory provides a third analytical dimension. Liberalism emphasizes the role of institutions, democracy, trade interdependence, and multilateral cooperation in shaping state behavior (Lohalo et al., 2022). US policy documents, including the 2022 US Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa, reflect liberal premises through their emphasis on fostering open societies, democratic governance, and economic integration. However, liberal theory also acknowledges the limitations of institutional design when confronted with countervailing material power dynamics, as is evident in Africa's deepening economic ties with China despite sustained US democratic engagement. Together, these frameworks permit a rounded theoretical analysis of the tensions and trajectories in US-Africa relations.

3.0 Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative literature-based research methodology, which was appropriate for studies that sought to synthesize, interpret, and critically analyze existing scholarly knowledge on a defined subject. The study relied exclusively on secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, official government policy documents, and academic books accessed through Google Scholar and publicly available online repositories. Data collection followed a systematic approach whereby sources were selected based on their relevance to United States foreign policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa, soft power theory, and great power competition, with preference given to publications from 2012 to 2025 to ensure currency and analytical depth. Content analysis was applied as the primary analytical technique, enabling the identification of thematic patterns, theoretical arguments, and empirical findings across the reviewed literature. The study did not involve primary data collection, human subjects, or fieldwork, and was therefore not subject to ethical clearance requirements associated with empirical research designs.

4.0 Discussion of the Findings

The literature reviewed in this study reveals a persistent disjuncture between the ambitions of US foreign policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa and the resources, consistency, and strategic coherence required to realize those ambitions. Successive administrations have articulated comprehensive strategic frameworks premised on partnership, democracy, and development, yet the implementation of these frameworks has frequently been subordinated to competing domestic political priorities and constrained by insufficient resource commitments. As Carnegie Endowment (2024) documents, the US has announced at least seven major infrastructure initiatives relevant to Africa since 2013, many of which have since been transformed, significantly reoriented, or quietly discontinued, leaving African partners uncertain about the durability of American commitments.

Great power competition constitutes the most significant structural variable reshaping the context of US engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa. Kepe et al. (2023) demonstrate that the US strategic shift from counterterrorism to great power competition, while primarily directed at the Indo-Pacific and Europe, has repositioned Africa as a renewed theatre of influence competition. China's comprehensive economic engagement, encompassing infrastructure financing, technology transfer, and trade partnerships, has created durable ties with African governments that the US has struggled to match through soft power instruments alone. The gap between Chinese and American trade figures with Africa, which reached more than fourfold by 2024 (CSIS, 2025), reflects a structural imbalance in material engagement that soft power diplomacy cannot offset without complementary investments in commercial and financial infrastructure.

AGOA remains the most durable institutional expression of US trade engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa, but its limitations as a strategic tool have become increasingly apparent. Runde (2024) argues that AGOA's unilateral structure, which provides trade preferences without binding reciprocal commitments from the US, has constrained its capacity to catalyze African industrial development at the scale envisioned at its inception. Furthermore, uncertainty about AGOA's renewal, given its statutory expiration and the shifting political landscape in Washington, has undermined investor confidence and limited African governments' ability to plan long-term export strategies around its provisions. A more transformative US trade engagement with Africa would require moving beyond preference-based frameworks toward negotiated, reciprocal trade agreements that recognize Africa's own integration agenda through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

The Biden administration's 2022 Africa strategy represented the most explicit acknowledgment by Washington of the need to reframe US engagement beyond transactional interests. The strategy's emphasis on African agency, equal partnership, and the rejection of zero-sum framing in the context of great power competition reflected a constructive evolution in American policy discourse (White House, 2022). However, scholars at the Brookings Institution (2022) noted that meaningful implementation required coherence across interagency actors, including USAID, the State Department, the Department of Defense, the US Trade Representative, and development finance institutions. Achieving such coherence demands sustained political will and institutional coordination that has historically eluded US Africa policy.

Soft power instruments, including PEPFAR, educational exchanges, and public diplomacy, have generated demonstrable goodwill and institutional linkages between the US and Sub-Saharan Africa over decades. However, Rahim et al. (2025) warn that the suspension of USAID operations and the disruption of health programming under recent policy shifts have inflicted reputational damage that is both immediate and potentially long-lasting. The credibility of US soft power rests on its consistency and perceived legitimacy, and politically motivated disruptions to established programs undermine the foundational premise of attraction-based influence identified by Nye (2004). Rebuilding trust requires not only the restoration of suspended programs but also the institutionalization of US engagement frameworks in ways that insulate them from electoral-cycle volatility.

The literature also draws attention to the importance of African agency in shaping the terms of great power engagement. As the US Institute of Peace (2022) observes, African governments are not passive recipients of external influence but active agents who calculate the costs and benefits of alignment with competing powers. The African Union's growing institutional role, the emergence of the AfCFTA as the world's largest free trade area, and Africa's expanding voting bloc in the United Nations General Assembly, representing approximately 28 percent of member states (White House, 2022), collectively signal the continent's rising capacity to shape international outcomes. US policy will be most effective when it engages this agency constructively, supporting African-led institutional processes rather than imposing externally defined frameworks.

In summary, this study has examined US foreign policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa through a literature-based analysis anchored in soft power theory and complemented by realist and liberal theoretical frameworks. The review of empirical scholarship reveals that US engagement with the continent has evolved through successive strategic frameworks, from the Obama administration's democratic partnership model to the Trump administration's transactional Prosper Africa initiative and the Biden administration's comprehensive 2022 Africa strategy. Across these frameworks, a consistent tension has persisted between values-based objectives and material interest-driven imperatives, with the balance shifting depending on the domestic and international context in which each strategy was formulated.

The analysis has further established that great power competition, particularly between the US, China, and Russia, constitutes the dominant structural variable reshaping the strategic logic of US engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa. China's material advantages in trade volume, infrastructure financing, and institutional presence on the continent present challenges that US soft power instruments alone are insufficient to address. At the same time, the study has affirmed that instruments such as AGOA, PEPFAR, educational exchange programs, and multilateral diplomatic engagement continue to generate important foundations of American influence in Africa, provided they are maintained consistently and implemented with adequate resources and institutional coherence.

5.0 Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the effectiveness of US foreign policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa is contingent on the coherence, consistency, and adequacy of the instruments deployed in pursuit of stated strategic objectives. The soft power framework developed by Nye (2004) provides an analytically productive lens for understanding the appeal-based instruments the US employs in Africa, from development assistance and trade preferences to cultural diplomacy and health interventions. However, the study's findings also confirm that soft power is not a sufficient basis for US strategic engagement in an environment characterized by intensifying great power competition and the continent's own growing geopolitical agency.

The core conclusion of this paper is that US foreign policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa requires a fundamental recalibration from episodic engagement driven by competitive imperatives toward sustained, Africa-centered partnership that takes African development priorities as its foundational orientation. This recalibration must involve a reform of the AGOA framework toward a more reciprocal and durable trade architecture, the restoration and institutionalization of health and development programs insulated from partisan disruption, and the deepening of multilateral cooperation that acknowledges African agency in shaping international norms and governance. Without such a recalibration, the US risks ceding strategic ground in Africa not merely to China and Russia, but to the legitimate aspirations of African peoples for development partners who treat them as equals rather than instruments.

6.0 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are advanced:

i. The United States government should prioritize the renewal and substantive reform of AGOA beyond its current preference-based model, incorporating reciprocal provisions that incentivize African industrial value-addition and align with the AfCFTA integration agenda.
ii. Washington should institutionalize its development and health programming in Africa through legislative frameworks and multi-year funding commitments that reduce the vulnerability of these programs to partisan domestic politics, thereby reinforcing the credibility of US soft power.
iii. The US should expand multilateral diplomatic engagement with African institutions, including the African Union and the African Development Bank, and ensure that its commercial diplomacy through Prosper Africa and Power Africa initiatives is adequately funded and coordinated across relevant government agencies.
iv. US policymakers should incorporate African civil society, diaspora communities, and private sector actors as substantive co-designers of engagement frameworks rather than as secondary consultees, thereby anchoring US policy in African-owned development priorities.
v. Future research should examine the impact of specific US soft power instruments, including educational exchange programs and public diplomacy initiatives, on African public perceptions of the US, using comparative survey data to assess the evolving effectiveness of these instruments in a competitive information environment.

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