It need hardly be said that it has been a bizarre time to be living in the United States, not least to be an Africanist in Washington, DC. Relentless, polemical discussions about race, immigration, border security, and trade colour in all directions the foreign relations of the United States, even if they are not as often and as prominently invoked against Africa and Africans.

In the context of the Trump administration, Africa, if it is remembered at all, is mostly recalled in indifferent, if not ignominious contexts: the infamous expletive the president used to describe the continent; the easing of restrictions on the importation of trophies of endangered animals; First Lady Melania Trump’s wardrobe; the abortive visit of Donald Trump’s first Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, who lost his job while in Nigeria; the ambush death of U.S. special forces in Niger.

It was in these circumstances, which the moderators politely avoided, that Ambassador John Bolton, the national security advisor to President Trump, articulated the U.S. administration’s “new” Africa strategy in Washington, DC. It was a moment of anticipation: what would Bolton say? What would be new? Surely Bolton, a foreign policy veteran, would try to reassure those in the audience and beyond that when it came to Africa, the United States now had a sober, succinct policy, putting to rest the memorable moments of the past two years as aberrations or mere failings of public relations.
What the audience heard was indeed a strategy, partial and contradictory though it was. But perhaps more significantly, Bolton’s speech said as much about the self-image of the United States, at least as imagined by this administration, as it did about Africa: a benign, non-imperialist great power, an obviously and inherently better trade partner, but also an assertive state morally justified in ratcheting up competition against China, Russia, and, presumably, any lesser nation.

**China, Russia and the African omission**

Bolton mentioned China fourteen times in his speech, with one additional mention of Beijing. Russia was mentioned six times. With the substitution of a few examples in the text, this could have been a speech about Latin America or Asia, and the U.S. competition against its rivals for strategic advantage in those regions.

Only Djibouti, Libya, Mali, South Sudan, Western Sahara and Zambia were mentioned individually in the speech. As members of the G-5 Sahel Joint Force, Mauritania, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mali (again) merited mention. This was not only a version of America First; it was a speech with little sustained inclusion of the thoughts or views of Africans, with only the pretence of consideration of African agency. To announce an Africa strategy without mentioning Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, or South Africa, let alone the African Union, is odd. But then Africans were not necessarily the key audience for this message.

Bolton argued that in Africa, China was a bad actor. There were “disturbing effects of China’s quest to obtain more political, economic, and military power,” he said. Russia was engaged in “corrupt economic dealings…with little regard for the rule of law or accountable and transparent governance…It continues to sell arms and energy in exchange for votes at the United Nations—votes that keep strongmen in power, undermine peace and security, and run counter to the best interests of the African people.”

History, of course, offers numerous examples of U.S. engagement and interference in Africa since the end of the colonial era, since the end of the Cold War, since 9/11. It would be an understatement to say that not all of these episodes have been benign or motivated by altruistic interest. The point is not to recount these familiar cases but to make the obvious more obvious: one can debate America’s interests, but to conclude that they are always noble is a delusion, and to cast stones at one’s rivals smacks of hypocrisy.

General Thomas Waldhauser, the head of the U.S. Africa Command, noted in September 2017 that the U.S. goal was “to work with China in Africa as fellow stakeholders in peace, security, and stability on the continent”. For Beijing, Bolton’s gauntlet raises doubts as to whether this is still the case.

What the Trump administration should realise is that in a choice between the U.S. and China, it is far from assured that every African country would choose the United States. In this metastasised version of the great game, which treats Africa as just another theatre of U.S. engagement with Beijing and Moscow, most African states would rather not have to choose sides. But if they did, heed the annual pilgrimage of African leaders to Beijing: Washington may find its creed is far less compelling.
Take infrastructure. If transactional behaviour is the name of the game, then there is a simple question to pose: Will the United States commit to build and fund better stadia and state houses, roads and bridges and railways, dams and power stations than the Chinese? To the scale that the Chinese have built all over the continent? On a continent full of Chinese concrete, calling Beijing corrupt and self-interested will not wash. Americans have plenty of self-interest too.

The contradictions of Bolton’s principled themes

One could argue that Bolton’s overall themes are, in principle, sound. And to be fair, in those principles, coupled with the White House fact sheet (issued subsequent to Bolton’s speech) the strategy offers much continuity, at least in theory. As Bolton himself argued, “...the strategy addresses three core U.S. interests on the continent”:

- First, advancing U.S. trade and commercial ties with nations across the region to the benefit of both the United States and Africa.
- Second, countering the threat from radical Islamic terrorism and violent conflict.
- And third...that U.S. taxpayer dollars for aid are used efficiently and effectively.”

These are points that would not have been out of place for the Obama, Bush or Clinton administrations. Hardly anyone in the United States opposes aid efficiency, an effective counterterrorism policy or greater American prosperity. However, a deeper look reveals plenty of contradictions between the rhetoric and reality, offering more questions than answers.

Take the threat of terrorism. As the White House fact sheet explains, “the United States will continue to help our African allies build security forces to counter these threats and strengthen the rule of law.” Yet in August of this year, the Defence Department announced plans to cut the number of U.S. forces deployed in Africa. As the New York Times reported, "officials said they expected most of the troop cuts and scaled-back missions to come from Central and West Africa, where Special Operations missions have focused on training African militaries to combat the growing threat from extremist Islamist militant groups." Is the new strategy a reversal of these earlier plans? Can more training be done with fewer forces?

Or take peacekeeping. Bolton said the U.S. will “re-evaluate its support for U.N. peacekeeping missions. We will only back effective and efficient operations, that we will seek to streamline, reconfigure, or terminate missions that are unable to meet their own mandate or facilitate lasting peace. Our objective is to resolve conflicts, not freeze them in perpetuity.”

The recipient of his peacekeeping ire was the relatively tiny 458-member United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), established in 1991. MINURSO has failed not because of any inherent deficiency in peacekeeping practice, but largely because of Moroccan intransigence.

Leaving aside the fact that the oldest and most entrenched U.N. missions are in conflicts outside Africa (for example, the U.N. Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP), established in 1949; the U.N. Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), established in 1964; the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), established in 1978), how different is this strategy from the
peacekeeping review that has preoccupied the outgoing U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., Nikki Haley, for much of her time in New York, and which has led to cuts to the U.N. mission in the DR Congo and the beginning of the end of the U.N.-African Union. Mission in Darfur? Is this continuity or change?

In April 2017, Haley told the Security Council that “we cannot continue these massive missions forever...the simple fact is that in many cases, U.N. peacekeeping is just not working.” It was a statement Bolton could have made. Twenty months later, it’s not clear that the Trump administration’s aspiration to “see more cooperative regional security organizations” like the G5 Sahel Joint Force will overcome the real dilemmas of peacekeeping in difficult places. As AMISOM in Somalia, AMIS in Darfur, IGAD in South Sudan and ECOMOG in Liberia and Sierra Leone have shown, regional security initiatives are no panacea.

It’s the economy, stupid?

Maybe, it’s all about the money. In that respect, Zambia’s December 15th rebuttal of Bolton’s assertion of the details of its debts to China is instructive. Zambia does, indeed, face a debt crisis. And although Lusaka has clearly managed its public finances poorly in recent years, no rescue effort from the West has materialised: Zambia has yet to find a path to financing from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

There’s no prize for guessing which country holds the greatest influence at the IMF. It is, of course, the United States. Obviously, most African countries want to avoid predatory lending arrangements, whether made in Beijing or elsewhere. Whether the solution is in Washington is another matter, as both Lusaka’s statement, and the IMF’s non-response, by implication, question. Nor are memories of the structural adjustment programmes and the Washington Consensus yet distant.

Bolton might argue that it is unfair to be tagged with these failed policies of the past, even as he repeated an old conditionality: to “focus our economic efforts on African governments that act with us as strategic partners, and, which are striving toward improved governance and transparent business practices.”

He might point to his wish for new trade agreements, increased reciprocity, and broader market access. However, although the fact sheet mentions the landmark Clinton-era African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which has helped some African countries to improve their exports to the U.S., this law is not based on reciprocity - it recognises that weaker African economies do need preferential access to a much bigger U.S. market to see any benefit at all. Although AGOA has been reauthorised until 2025, it is unclear what the new strategy means for legislation. Will the law be revised? And if so, how? Akin to the revisions made to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)? Or along more dramatic lines?

Inconvenient a fact though it may be, for many African countries, the often relatively modest volume of U.S. trade is even more resource-focused than China: $6.9 billion of the $7.1 billion worth of goods the U.S. imports from Nigeria consist of “mineral fuels”. The top U.S. imports from Cameroon are mineral fuels, wood and wood products, cocoa and rubber. From Ethiopia, coffee, mostly unroasted (losing Addis much of the value chain), with manufactured goods (knit apparel and footwear) a distant second and third.

The truth is that most of the world has exploited Africa’s natural resources, and, in this respect, the U.S. is not much different. Though Bolton noted a new initiative, “Prosper Africa”, that would “support open markets for American businesses, grow Africa’s middle class, promote youth employment opportunities, and improve the business climate”, details of how this would be done are
so far sparse.

Very few jobs in the United States rely on the export of goods and services to Africa. In 2015, the latest year for which figures are available, the total number of U.S. jobs supported by exports to Africa was 229,214, or about 2 per cent of comparable jobs and not many more than those dependent on exports to the CAFTA-DR group of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic, with a collective population 50 million. Without a credible and specific plan to improve exports, it’s hard to see how these numbers will changes dramatically.

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After the rhetoric

With his attack on China, Bolton grabbed the headlines. The ambiguities went unaddressed, and the opinions and concerns of Africans themselves were not the central theme.

Though more details will eventually emerge, and inconsistencies may be resolved and contradictions rebutted, the foundation of this policy will remain shaky. In the age of Trump, the U.S. has axiomatic problems in its international relations: in how it is perceived, in how others understand its intentions, in its credibility, in its reliability. To be successful, any Africa policy would have to surmount these limitations. Even if the incongruities are overcome, it is far from certain that this strategy can or will do so.

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