

# US-Africa summit: In whose interest?

– *Dakuku Peterside*

The US – African summit has come and gone. The US President, Joe Biden, and a group of US business leaders met with 49 African presidents and many business stakeholders. He made promises to improve the US bilateral and multilateral relationship with Africa. He has spent much of his first two years in office trying to assuage doubters on the international stage about American leadership after four years of Donald Trump's "America First" foreign policy. With this summit — a follow-up to the first such gathering held eight years ago by President Barack Obama — Biden has an opportunity to assuage concerns in Africa about US commitment to the continent. This rapprochement comes at a difficult moment; at a time when China is increasingly bullish about closer ties with Africa. The need to counterbalance China's strategy is evident. The Biden administration made it plain that it believes that Chinese and Russian activities in Africa could have negative long-term consequences for the continent. He believes that the Chinese and Russian investments and military projects in Africa present an opportunity for these countries to challenge the rules-based international order, advance their narrow commercial and geopolitical interests, and undermine transparency and openness. To its credit, the summit produced an MOU with the new African Continental Free Trade Area Secretariat that spurred more than \$15 billion in new deals, which will turn, lift, and improve people's lives across the continent. These investments will deliver tangible benefits to people; create new, good-paying jobs both in the US and Africa, opening the \$ 3.4 trillion African market to the US. Some of the highlights of the projects include investments to support small-and-medium-sized entrepreneurs and



enterprises – especially lifting an opportunity for women-owned businesses, diaspora-owned businesses, and businesses owned by members of historically underserved communities. Investing to facilitate more significant regional trade within Africa, especially an investment of about \$500million, is expected to significantly improve roads, reduce transportation costs, and ease sea cargo traffic.

However, some critics are skeptical and cynical about these investment promises by the US to Africa. They have argued that the trade deal of \$15 billion and other paltry sums promised is insufficient given that Africa has fifty-four countries with different developmental needs. Though not related, this investment promise, compared to US aid to Ukraine, shows how low it is. Currently, the US alone has invested over \$50 billion in Ukraine. Besides, even the AfDB AFRICA Investment Forum last year syndicated \$15.56 billion just for the Lagos-Abidjan highway, a corridor of six lanes. By all ramifications, \$15

billion is a drop in the ocean of the type of investment Africa needs to leapfrog its development. Africa needs huge investment to lift it from its current economic quagmire, not tokenism. Therefore, we must take these promises with a healthy dose of skepticism and caution. Africans must rely on themselves and work together to advance their cause.

The global powers are wooing Africa because of its natural resources, the size of its market and geopolitical reasons. But one thing is clear: they are all wooing Africa to achieve their national interest first. Do not be deceived. This reason is why African leaders must be circumspect in reaching some of these agreements and fighting for the good of Africa.

We know that any financial assistance or even investment from the west including the US always comes with interest rates tied to IMF and World Bank regimes, and US trade or economic concessions will always have diplomatic conditionalities. You cannot enjoy US help without aligning with their global strategic interests. The Chinese, on the other hand, seem to prefer investments in infrastructure, deploying "soft power" to achieve its objectives. The critical question is: where is Africa's interest in these agreements? It is not what the US promises to give that should concern Africa, but what it plans to take from Africa. Historically, we know that what the superpowers eventually take from Africa far outweighs any immediate benefit they presented. There are no free lunches, even in Freetown, and the US gives a little with one hand and takes a lot with the other.

Why are African leaders always excited whenever invited by any of the developed economies for these types of summits? It is either the US- Africa summit, UK- Africa summit or China-

Africa Cooperation forum. And when they attend these summits, the discussions are pretentiously about how they can work together for the benefit of all sides. However, we know the side that will benefit more – the convener. The conveners always set the agenda and not Africa. Naturally, the agenda will reflect the interest of the host nation. There has never been an Africa-led agenda in these bilateral forums, but the discussions always centre on Africa. Why can't Africa leaders convene these types of Summits, as eloquently argued in a viral video by Rwanda's President Paul Kagame? When will Africa convene a meeting of leaders of the most developed economies on African soil, with Africa setting the agenda? When Africa starts taking the initiative and control of its narrative, it will start making noticeable progress among nations.

The charity narrative has not worked and will never work. When the rest of the world feels it is its responsibility to save Africa from itself and has a mindset of planning to benefit maximally from the abundant natural resources or the market, Africa is both the victim and casualty. The sole responsibility for Africa's economic and political emancipation rests solely on African leaders and their citizens. China, with a population of over 1.3 billion people, has grown economically and politically in the past four decades. This is not because of US or Western-based intervention from summits. But because of outstanding leadership that galvanised the people to become productive. Now they deal with the rest of the world on their terms. Today, it is negotiating with Africa on its terms, with Africa still maintaining its charity stands. The US feels threatened by China's exploits in Africa and wants to solidify its relationship with Africa, which has gone wrong over the years due to a lack of mutual trust. Africa needs its strategy for growth. At the core of this strategy must be the increase in productivity through industrialisation and innovation. African leaders must look inward and efficiently harness the abundant



human and material capital within it. Even when inviting or allowing outsiders to participate in this development strategy, it must be on the terms of Africa and nothing more.

African leaders must always protect the national interest of countries in Africa. In situations where an individual nation or group of nations are weak to negotiate, Africa must have a forum to negotiate together and protect the interests of these countries. Therefore, I welcome the proposal by Biden that Africa must have a permanent seat in the G-20. In supranational forums where no single African country can qualify, Africa can represent all countries as one entity. I must note unequivocally that the US – African Summit, in all good faith and intention, is nothing more than a US summit to consolidate and solidify its

national strategic interest with and in Africa. Africa must know what the US interest in Africa is and how to leverage this to negotiate a better deal for itself. It must do the same for other global powers trying to go to bed with it. Africa is the new battleground of economic and political diplomacy. It is time we take advantage of this position and benefit from all suitors maximally for the continent's growth.

Africa must be non-aligned in the ensuing global power tussle between agents and proponents of the existing international order, where the US, UK, and the West, in general, are waking up to the threat to that global order by the rise of China, India, and Russia. Africa's interest must be how to harness the situation for its benefit and not allow any group to take advantage of Africa, as has been the case historically through slavery, colonization, and neo-colonialism.

The time is for action. This is a time for a change in thinking and strategy. It cannot continue to be business as usual, and we remain little pawns in the hands of any global power that wants our natural resources or market for their benefit. Africans alone can do this, and no one, with all the good intentions in the world and all the summits in this world, will do it for us. About 300 African stakeholders and 49 leaders attended the last summit. The combined cost of attending this summit by all these people will be a sizable percentage of the amount Biden pledged at the summit!

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