

US, UK, interest in Nigeria threatened by Kleptocrats

... Chatham

Nigeria's just concluded presidential elections have been focusing minds in London and Washington. Like tens of millions of Nigerian voters, Anglo-American officials realized what was at stake. Nigeria is Africa's largest economy and is on track to be the third most populous country in the world by 2045. The UK and the US have enduring strategic interests in Nigeria, which are threatened by Nigeria's kleptocratic ruling class's tolerance of – and complicity in – democratic backsliding, grand corruption and gross human rights violations. The new administration faces a daunting array of challenges, from underdevelopment to insecurity, fiscal pressures and poor governance, which went unaddressed under outgoing President Muhammadu Buhari.

But over the last several years, the UK and US have been reluctant to focus their bilateral engagement on democracy and governance. Instead, they appear to have turned a blind eye, deepened their engagement with the country's heavy-handed, highly corrupt military, and done little to prevent Nigerian kleptocrats from spending unexplained wealth in London, New York and elsewhere, while minimizing bilateral fallout from the #EndSARS protests, the Twitter ban, or the Nigerian army's forced abortion programme.

Reactions from London and Washington to contentious episodes follow a predictable pattern. Condemnation and calls for accountability and reform are usually met with Nigerian government pushback, including terse denials, scuttling bilateral initiatives, or even veiled threats. Chastened, UK and US officials then mute their public criticism and shift gears, making private entreaties to like-minded Nigerian officials. Then, over time and as events slip from the headlines, bilateral relations revert to business as usual. Little, if any, follow-up occurs. Keen to perpetuate this, Nigeria's leaders reflexively bristle any time UK or US officials push them on democracy and human rights. Over time, officials have become unduly cautious, even deferential.

Over time and as events slip from the headlines, bilateral relations revert to business as usual. Little, if any, follow-up occurs.

Washington's response to soldiers' October 2020 killing of unarmed #EndSARS protestors illustrates this cycle. The US Embassy remained silent until over a year after the incident, when – in response to a damning judicial panel of inquiry report – it urged the Nigerian government to address the 'alleged abuses'. US officials have yet to follow up these tardy and tentative statements, and the bilateral relationship soon went back to normal.

Indeed, rather than prompting a reappraisal of bilateral military cooperation, US security assistance intensified six months later when Washington agreed to sell \$1 billion in attack helicopters to Abuja. US defence cooperation with Nigeria had similarly deepened after Abuja ignored Washington's demand that those

responsible for the 2015 Zaria massacre – in which soldiers killed 348 civilians – be held accountable. UK policymakers have followed a similar pattern. A few months after the panel of inquiry report, London expanded its Defence and Security Partnership with Abuja, promising closer military and police cooperation. Although the post-forum communiqué contains a commitment to respect human rights and protect civilians, Nigerian officials have repeatedly made – and failed to abide by – such promises in the past.

Nigerian forces continue to flout international humanitarian law by burning villages, using combat air strikes as a policing tool, hampering humanitarian operations, conducting extrajudicial killings, and operating charnel houses like Giwa Barracks. Given this context, London's push to deepen military ties seems to signal the downgrading of democracy and governance concerns.

Nigeria's presidential transition offers US and UK policymakers a chance to reset their relations with Abuja. Instead of a focus on quick wins – presidential photo ops, arms sales, and trade deals – they should look to Nigeria's perennial democracy and governance challenges and recall that much-hyped honeymoon periods following the 2010 transition and 2015 presidential election quickly fizzled. UK and US officials should take a consistent position on democracy, governance, human rights, and corruption. Rather than the mixed messages of alternately kowtowing and finger-wagging, they should articulate clear red lines. They should also stop trading off long-term progress for short-term gain. In the rare instances when core values and perceived strategic interests in Nigeria conflict, UK and US policymakers should be able to justify the costs and explain the benefits of overriding concerns about democracy and governance in favour of a perceived immediate imperative. Anglo-American officials should step back and ask whether their elite-friendly approach has improved – or unintentionally harmed – democracy and governance outcomes in Nigeria.

UK and US officials should take a consistent position on democracy, governance, human rights, and corruption.

Such a reset would bring the UK and US into line with the chorus of criticism from experts, legislators, academics, think-tanks, journalists, and civil society voices questioning the wisdom of partnering with Nigeria's predatory military, and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. By selling democracy and governance issues short, London and Washington have inadvertently undermined their countries' own interests in political stability, peace and security, socio-economic development, good governance, climate resilience, and expanded trade and investment. Though timely, UK and US policymakers' heightened focus on Nigeria's elections raises significant questions about the coherence of their approach. Just as Nigeria's leadership is changing, so should the thinking of their external partners