

## US foreign policy prefers Kenya

Pearl Matibe

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Kenya is “one of our key friends in Africa — nay, in the world,” said a confident, pleased United States (US) assistant secretary of State for African Affairs, Tibor P Nagy, at a May 9 briefing in Washington, DC.

On May 7 to 8, the US Department of State’s deputy secretary, John J Sullivan and Kenya’s Foreign Affairs minister Monica Juma, in Washington DC held the inaugural bilateral strategic dialogue and signed two key framework documents.

This raised their diplomatic relations and deepened ties between the two countries.

Nagy and Foreign Affairs ministry political and diplomatic secretary, ambassador Tom Amolo, co-chaired the two-day interagency discussions. Nagy described the talks as “beyond impressive”, but very pleased even though Kenyans “live in a very tough neighbourhood”.

He declined responding to media questions on intelligence sharing, saying simply: “No comment.”

Both affirmed their commitment to the democratic value system. The US and Kenya will hold a second bilateral strategic dialogue in Nairobi in the summer of 2020.

It all sounds very cosy, except that is not all. Why should Africans care?

Kenya is neither an advanced economy, nor hugely democratic. It is not the “usual ally” the US befriends. On the contrary, many African countries are low-income, fragile, and negatively impacted by natural disasters.

In some regions on the continent, there are authoritarian regimes that are highly repressive and closing spaces made up of semi-authoritarian leaders where parliaments are rubber stamp bodies. At times, this makes policy outcomes challenging.

For instance, on May 20 in his remarks at the Advisory Committee On Voluntary Foreign Aid Public Meeting (ACFVA ) held at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), US Agency for International Development (USAid) administrator, Mark Green said about authoritarian leaders: “These days, they embrace elections. They welcome elections, and then mobilise every tool, every technology, and every strategy to steal them and bend them to their will. By the time that voters go to the polls, the outcome is pre-ordained. And, the authoritarian may even have gained a veneer of legitimacy. Authoritarians have new tools and tactics they are deploying to bend elections and snuff out the voices of the people.”

He added, underscoring, “so many brave souls; they’re counting on us. They’re counting on us to stand with them. They’re counting on us to work with them and they’re counting on us to remain a lifeline, a beacon of hope.”

His remarks ended with a profound statement: “We are at a crossroads moment. Crossroads moments imply choices.”

## **Questions**

It’s important to ask the question: Why did the US government choose to improve bilateral relations with Kenya? We ought to examine its observable, enhanced foreign policy approach regarding the reasons for and the patterns of engagement.

One has to wonder if the argument being made by the US to get more involved in Kenya and countries like Uganda is plausible, an expression of the Donald Trump doctrine or a true bipartisan US foreign policy; a “feel good humanitarian intervention”, veritable US national security interest or sincere African leaders’ international engagement.

The sentiments expressed by both Nagy and Juma indicate a preference that suggests current US foreign policy is more heavily and consistently influenced by Kenya’s diplomatic, economic, and military promise, including counter-terrorism co-operation.

Although they did not confirm if neither intelligence sharing, nor faster information sharing was discussed in the meetings, Nagy said: “In terms of defence, democracy, governance and civilian security these topics are usually discussed as a matter of course and practice.”

Domestic politics and international relations are usually inextricably linked.

In the case of US-Kenya relations, the reasons jointly given for elevated bilateral relations were the four thematic pillars of economic prosperity, trade, and investment, defence co-operation, democracy, governance, and civilian security, including multilateral and regional issues.

Juma expressed delight stating that it “is our desire to give traction to our President’s think big” mantra.

However, key questions remain: What should African national interests be? Can anyone’s efforts defeat the jihadist fundamentalist group, al-Shabaab, based in East Africa and comprehend its extended footprint into Mozambique?

## **Relevance of Uganda, Zimbabwe and South Africa**

Why are there no increased US relations with Uganda, Zimbabwe or South Africa?

In December 2017, Uganda President Yoweri Museveni and his supporters changed the Constitution, removing the age limit on the presidency, thus allowing him to stay in office indefinitely.

It’s a country with a staggering population of more than 34 million people, 75% of whom are under the age of 30, with 50% living in extreme poverty.

If compared to Zimbabwe, Uganda is better off. Zimbabwe is listed by the International Monetary Fund’s 2019 Africa Regional Economic Outlook (REO) as a country in a fragile situation.

The report confirms Zimbabwe's elevated public debt vulnerability, along with countries in debt distress; the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, The Gambia, Mozambique, São Tomé and Príncipe and South Sudan.

While in the past Museveni has been good at getting involved in conflicts outside his borders, recently, he's been great at taking in refugees. Uganda holds the highest number of refugees; an influx of 1,1 million refugees and asylum-seekers as of October 2018 from the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan since July 2016. Museveni's "Pan-African" ideology has driven Uganda's refugee policy.

That has to be commended.

However, what does Museveni have to do with US's foreign policy? Does the US support a head of state that pushed for Parliament to scrap the presidential age limit allowing him to potentially rule for life?

After gaining independence from Britain in 1962 with Milton Obote as Prime Minister, who was toppled in a military coup by Idi Amin in 1971, another coup also happened in 1985 which brought Museveni into power.

The US is sticking with support to Uganda, indicating that Uganda is a positive force in the regional security environment. Nagy stressed earlier this year while in Kampala: "I have to tell the African leaders that if you want American companies to invest their money in your country, then they need to have a positive business environment which means:

λ minimum levels of corruption

λ fair treatment

λ honoring contracts

λ a good governance environment

He warned regarding deals with China: "It's easy to sign a contract and increase a country's debt, build a project and everybody above the class of turning a shovel comes from the other country."

Yes, Uganda receives billions in economic and military assistance although the government has faced widespread condemnation for its actions against Museveni's critics.

Being one of the youngest countries in the world with an average age of 19, perhaps it's a good thing for the US to take an interest with this level of youth population boom and make the country an anchor of its attention.

Increasingly though, there is expert debate on lessons to learn from Zimbabwe and about South Africa.

Marian L Tupy, senior policy analyst at the Centre for Global Liberty and Prosperity at the Cato Institute, has called Zimbabwe's approach to its economy a real life "experiment in alternative economics", saying there are "riches of wisdom to be learned about what happened in Zimbabwe over the last 20 years", which he described as "government terrorism".

Tupy added at an April Cato event: “Regrettably, these lessons are being completely ignored south of the Limpopo where the South African marxist government is on its way to repeat almost exactly the same mistakes that Zimbabwe has made.”

Tupy highlighted South Africa’s moves to nationalise its central bank and views taking hold that the country is “experimenting with very strict racial laws in business and government”.

He pointed out that “Zimbabwe continues to be relevant. For the sake of other African countries who are trying to decide what kind of economic and political arrangements they should be following in order to become prosperous in the future.”

At the same Cato event, Barry D Wood, a Washington correspondent, pointed that: “Zimbabwe is an important country that is exceedingly rich; rich with human resources, a fine educational system, connected to the US, South Africa and Europe. It has platinum, lithium, coal, diamonds and six flights a day out of Johannesburg yet three-quarters of the people are food-aid dependent, with four million Zimbabweans in South Africa.”

Wood broached the question: Should the west engage or not with Zimbabwe? Foreign investors want in, but won’t come without western approval. Government is incompetent, divided and effective reforms won’t be implemented. Yet, South Africa wants President Emmerson Mnangagwa to succeed.

The “case for not engaging?”

Wood underlined that Zanu PF “is determined to hold power at all costs; those are the words of the former US ambassador to Zimbabwe who says there should not be engagement on that account because Zanu PF simply will not give up power”.

### **Defence and security**

When Trump and Kenya President Uhuru Kenyatta dialogued at the White House on August 27, 2018, Kenya’s prominent military role in operations against the Al-Qaeda-affiliated insurgent group al-Shabaab in Somalia was spotlighted.

Trump expressed his “appreciation for Kenya’s significant contribution to the African Union mission in Somalia and recognised Kenyan troops’ sacrifices in the fight against al-Shabaab.” Last year’s media speculation that the visit would result in closer diplomatic ties with Kenya has now been confirmed.

No doubt more details will unfold on defence support for Kenya and increased US military co-operation.

### **Disaster planning**

As the gateway to east Africa, with goods entering countries such as Uganda and the African continent as a whole, the implementation for disaster planning in southern Africa is critical. Both the US and Kenya dialogue actors agreed that they recognised the significance.

On Kenya emulating any foreign policy models that could be an example or used to advantage southern Africa’s cyclone-hit Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi, Juma said: “Clearly, there are new climatic threats. This [US relationship] is an opportunity not only for Kenya, but also for the continent, the AU and Sadc.”

Yet, if one compares China's foreign policy in Africa to the US approach — it could be said it's less noble in many respects — there's yet no consensus on this issue among experts.

The potential impact on Africa's socio-economic growth, defence, long-term emergency disaster planning and sustainability should inform country-specific foreign policy approaches.

On the bright side, Nagy confirmed he's "grateful for opportunities that open closer inclusive engagement" with Kenya stressing the keenness "to build the capacity they need".

Understanding why the US chooses one African country over another in its foreign policy approach and level of support is important. In addition, it would be wise to grasp the divergent ideological approaches of each interested sovereign country at the dialogue table.

Ultimately, countries like Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe and many across the continent need long-term development capacity. African leaders must formulate foreign policies that allow them to chart their own futures, create pro-democracy gains and sincerely protect the national security interests for their African people and the US for the American people.

True, African countries are hemorrhaging with, by and large, vulnerable economies and a military in the President's pocket for many of them.

### **Going forward**

Uganda needs to start thinking about its future and who will replace Museveni if he dies in office or is forced out. It cannot afford to be complacent.

The Trump administration would be wise to take care of how its remarks about African-Americans are perceived and received by Africans—millions of Africans do pay attention — if it hopes to move more bilateral relationships from being lukewarm to more friendly.

This should remain top in the mind as it reviews China's increasing involvement in Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, the continent, and from older security issues in Somalia and newer jihadist ones in Mozambique.

Formulating foreign policy solely based on national liberation ideology alone or US national interests only will leave out millions of people with 21st Century aspirations, youths needing jobs, young mothers needing healthcare delivery systems, women, youth and diaspora votes that are critical, as well as generations that don't remember the liberation struggles.

Remaining divorced from ideas that build a sustainable future will not help African leaders nor help US-Africa foreign policy approaches.

Being hopeful alone is not enough.

Democracy and strong foreign policies are backsliding in Kenya, Uganda, and other African countries such as Zimbabwe, South Africa, and even the current US foreign policy is weaker than was in previous administrations.

The US must find ways to take the relationships built through US foreign aid and pivot to more commercial relationships with Africa in order to compete with other global powers such as China and Russia.

In addition, local Africa-based civil society organisations should have a consistent amount of engagement in policy processes and outcomes.

Civil society can have the capacity to offer citizens a say in decisions and to increase pluralism, influence foreign policy and seek accountability from State actors.

When all is said and done, here is what you should mull over: The state of Africa, US foreign policy's emerging role on the continent and your role in emboldening or hindering authoritarian leaders.

For now, Kenya is the United State's leading friend in "Africa — nay, in the world".