

# A Vacuum of Strategy

## America's African Retreat and the New Great-Power Contest

DR. ERNEST GUNASEKARA-ROCKWELL

### Abstract

This article argues that the United States is committing a strategic blunder of the first order by downgrading its diplomatic, informational, and military presence in Africa at the precise moment the continent has become a central arena for great-power competition. While America retreats, its primary adversaries—the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation—are executing a coordinated envelopment strategy. China employs patient economic and financial statecraft to create dependency, while Russia uses military and informational tools to foster instability and sever Africa's ties to the West. This analysis, framed by the DIMEFIL construct, posits that this dangerous strategic vacuum can and must be countered. A reversal does not require massive terrestrial deployments but a smarter application of power leveraging America's asymmetric advantage in space. The US Space Force offers the critical capabilities in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; secure communications; and informational warfare required to reassert American influence, expose adversary actions, and offer African nations a superior partnership.

\*\*\*

It is one of the more exquisite ironies of our age that just as Africa ascends to the forefront of global strategic relevance, the United States—custodian of the liberal order and self-appointed steward of global stability—chooses this moment to avert its gaze. This is not mere oversight; it is a studied, almost philosophical, disengagement. A retreat not born of necessity, but of a peculiar blend of strategic torpor and moral fatigue.

Africa, once the cartographic afterthought of American foreign policy, now stands as the fulcrum upon which the balance of twenty-first-century geopolitics may well pivot. Its mineral wealth is not merely vast—it is indispensable. Its population is not merely growing—it is surging toward a demographic explosion that will define labor markets, consumer bases, and migratory flows for generations. And its 54 sovereign votes in the United Nations are not symbolic—they are decisive.

As Senior Enlisted Advisor John Raines of the National Guard Bureau aptly observed, “Africa is a continent of immense strategic significance. With its vast natural resources, growing populations, and critical geographic position, it is a focal point for both opportunity and challenge.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John Raines, keynote speech, African Senior Enlisted Leader Conference, Rabat, Morocco, 12 June 2025.

And yet, Washington slumbers.

This is not the benign neglect of yesteryear. It is a dereliction of duty in the face of manifest opportunity and patent threat. For while we retreat into the comforting abstractions of “strategic patience” and “resource prioritization,” our adversaries—unencumbered by democratic scruples or bureaucratic inertia—advance with the cold precision of states that understand power and intend to wield it.

Beijing, with its Belt and Road Initiative, does not merely construct roads and ports—it builds dependencies. Moscow, with its Wagnerian proxies and arms-for-access diplomacy, does not merely pursue influence—it seeks leverage. Both understand what we, in our strategic somnolence, appear to have unlearned: that the international order does not tolerate absence. Where American presence recedes, it does not leave behind emptiness—it leaves behind opportunity, swiftly seized by those less encumbered by deliberation. Influence, after all, is not static. It migrates—toward will, toward ambition, toward power willing to act.

To grasp the magnitude of this failure, one must turn to the diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement (DIMEFIL) framework—a taxonomy of statecraft that, in its comprehensiveness, exposes the full spectrum of our abdication.<sup>2</sup> Diplomatically, we are absent. Informationally, we are incoherent. Militarily, we are sporadic. Economically and financially, we are parsimonious. In intelligence and law enforcement, we are reactive rather than proactive. It is a symphony of strategic underperformance.

And yet, all is not lost. America retains asymmetric advantages that no rival can match—chief among them, our dominance in the space domain, our unmatched innovation ecosystem, and the enduring appeal of our values when we choose to live by them. But these advantages are not self-executing. They require will. They necessitate vision. They need, dare one say, leadership.

The hour is late, but not terminal. What is needed is not a new doctrine, but a return to first principles: that power unused is power lost, that influence unguided is influence squandered, and that the defense of a liberal world order begins not in abstraction, but in the dusty corridors of African capitals where the future is being negotiated—often without us.

---

<sup>2</sup> Cesar Augusto Rodriguez, Timothy Charles Walton, and Hyong Chu, “Putting the ‘FIL’ into ‘DIME’: Growing Joint Understanding of the Instruments of Power,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 97, no. 2 (2020): 121–28, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/>.

## **The Dragon's Embrace: Economic Statecraft as Strategic Envelopment**

Power, like nature, abhors a vacuum. But unlike nature, power does not merely fill—it reshapes. And in Africa, the void left by American strategic indifference is not being filled by benign actors or neutral forces. It is being occupied—methodically, deliberately, and with chilling sophistication—by a regime that understands the art of influence not as a blunt instrument, but as a scalpel.

To mistake China's African strategy for opportunism is to misread the moment entirely. This is not improvisation; it is orchestration. Beijing's approach is a masterclass in economic statecraft—an elegant, almost balletic, envelopment of an entire continent. Under the capacious and deliberately amorphous banner of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has not merely entered Africa; it has embedded itself.<sup>3</sup>

It does not arrive with the moralizing baggage of Western diplomacy—no lectures on transparency, no sermons on civil liberties. It arrives with cranes, concrete, and capital. It offers the seduction of infrastructure without the inconvenience of reform. And in so doing, it ensnares.

The loans are not aid; they are instruments of leverage. Their terms are not generous; they are predatory. The collateral is not abstract; it is sovereign. The case of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port—ceded to China for 99 years after a debt default—is not an anomaly.<sup>4</sup> It is a warning. In Africa, the same model is being replicated with unnerving precision. From Nairobi to Kampala, strategic assets—airports, railways, ports—are being quietly mortgaged to Beijing under terms that would make a Renaissance usurer blush.

But the ingenuity of China's strategy lies not merely in its physical footprint. It lies in its digital one. The telecommunications infrastructure built by Huawei and ZTE—often financed by Chinese state banks—constitutes the nervous system of Africa's emerging digital economies. These are not neutral platforms. They are, from Beijing's perspective, dual-use assets: commercial on the surface, intelligence-gathering beneath. The continent's data—its communications, its

---

<sup>3</sup> Paul Nantulya, "China's United Front Strategy in Africa," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 5 September 2023, <https://africacenter.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> Brahma Chellaney, "China's Debt Trap Diplomacy," *Project Syndicate*, 23 January 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/>; and Brahma Chellaney, "Kenya revelations shine a light on China's predatory lending practices," *The Strategist*, 24 November 2022, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/>.

transactions, its metadata—flows through Chinese-built networks, stored on Chinese servers, governed by Chinese protocols.<sup>5</sup>

This is not just economic power. It is financial, technological, and covertly, intelligence power, applied with the precision of a surgeon and the patience of a strategist. It is a web of dependency that stretches from presidential palaces to the smartphones of ordinary citizens. And once woven, it is not easily undone.

What we are witnessing is not merely the rise of China in Africa. It is the quiet construction of a new geopolitical architecture—one in which sovereignty is conditional, transparency is optional, and allegiance is transactional. It is a world not of rules, but of arrangements. Not of alliances, but of entanglements.

And the West, in its languor, watches.

### **The Bear's Claw: Predation in the Guise of Partnership**

If China is the architect of Africa's gilded dependency, Russia is its demolition crew. Where Beijing builds, Moscow burns. Where China seduces with infrastructure, Russia coerces with instability. It is a strategy not of construction, but of corrosion—a feral, improvisational campaign that trades in chaos and profits from collapse.

Russia's approach is not subtle, but it is effective. It does not pretend to offer development. It offers dominion. Through the thinly veiled fiction of "private military contractors"—most infamously the Wagner Group, now rebranded with the antiseptic sobriquet "Africa Corps"—Moscow has inserted itself into the very sinews of African sovereignty. The deal is brutally transactional: regime survival in exchange for resource extraction. Palace guards for gold mines. Shock troops for diamond fields. Political assassins for access to a nation's subterranean wealth.<sup>6</sup>

This is not diplomacy. It is plunder masquerading as partnership. It is neocolonialism stripped of even the pretense of a civilizing mission. The czarist impulse lives on, now clad in camouflage and armed with Kalashnikovs.

But Russia's genius—if one may use the term in its most cynical sense—lies in its mastery of the modern coup. It has refined the art of regime change into a repeatable algorithm. First, the informational barrage: a deluge of disinformation,

---

<sup>5</sup> US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. *The New Big Brother: China and Digital Authoritarianism*, A Democratic Staff Report prepared for the use of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 21 July, 2020, 5, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/>.

<sup>6</sup> John A. Lechner and Sergey Eledinov, "Is Africa Corps a Rebranded Wagner Group?," *Foreign Policy*, 7 February 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>; and Julia Stanyard, *Mercenaries and Illicit Markets: Russia's Africa Corps and the Business of Conflict* (Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, February 2025), <https://globalinitiative.net/>.

tailored with surgical precision to exploit colonial grievances, ethnic tensions, and economic despair. France is blamed. The United States is blamed. The United Nations is blamed. The truth is irrelevant; the narrative is everything.<sup>7</sup>

Once the informational battlefield is saturated, the political center collapses. A military faction, emboldened and embittered, seizes power. And then, like clockwork, Moscow appears—not as an invader, but as a savior. It offers recognition, weapons, and mercenaries. It provides legitimacy to the illegitimate. And in return, it receives *carte blanche* access to the nation's mineral lifeblood.<sup>8</sup>

For example, one observes in the Central African Republic not a mere foreign policy engagement, but a meticulously orchestrated theatrical performance of what might charitably be termed “postmodern colonialism,” devoid of even the Victorian era's fig leaf of a civilizing mission. The *modus operandi* is grimly precise: first, the informational artillery barrage. As detailed by Monika Pronczuk, the Kremlin's operatives, through figures such as Ephrem Yalike-Ngonzo, seeded the national consciousness with a calculated cacophony of calumny, painting France, the United States, and the United Nations as the malevolent architects of the CAR's persistent woes.<sup>9</sup> This deluge of disinformation, disseminated through local media and online conduits, artfully inflamed pre-existing anticolonial sentiments and tribal resentments, meticulously preparing the ground for the subsequent political necrosis and the convenient emergence of a malleable, militaristic faction.

Having thus weakened the body politic to the point of collapse, Moscow then stepped onto the stage, not as an invader, for that would be too uncouth, but as a latter-day *deus ex machina*. The 2018 agreement for military assistance quickly transmogrified into a pervasive presence of Wagner Group mercenaries and “advisors”—a term that, in this context, strains credulity beyond its breaking point. These forces, often numbering in the hundreds, provided the Faustin-Archange Touadéra regime with the muscle to consolidate its precarious hold on power, a grotesque *quid pro quo* for unencumbered access to the nation's geological patrimony. The AP's reporting on Russia circumventing sanctions to funnel weaponry into the region lays bare the transactional core: in exchange for arms and the brutal services of these modern praetorians, Russia secures *carte blanche* over the

---

<sup>7</sup> Monika Pronczuk, “A former staffer exposes how Russia's disinformation machine worked in Central African Republic,” *AP News*, 21 November 2024, <https://apnews.com/>.

<sup>8</sup> Monika Pronczuk, John Leicester and Michael Biesecker, “Russia skirts Western sanctions to ramp up its military footprint in Africa,” *AP News*, 10 June 2025, <https://apnews.com/>; and Ryan Bauer et al., *Russian Mercenary and Paramilitary Groups in Africa: Examining Changes and Impacts Since the Wagner Rebellion* (Santa Monica: RAND, May 2025), <https://www.rand.org/>.

<sup>9</sup> Pronczuk, “A former staffer exposes how Russia's disinformation machine worked.”

CAR's diamond and gold mines, and indeed, timber concessions, a rapacious extraction that strips the nation of its future for immediate, nefarious gain.<sup>10</sup>

This is the raw application of military and informational power—deployed with ruthless efficiency and minimal cost. It is a strategy of maximum disruption for minimum investment. And it is working.

The West, meanwhile, dithers. It issues statements. It convenes summits. It wrings its hands. But it does not act. And in the vacuum of action, Russia thrives.

What we are witnessing is not merely the erosion of Western influence. It is the deliberate dismantling of the rules-based international order, one coup at a time. Russia is not building an empire. It is building a network of client states—fragile, dependent, and hostile to the West. It is not exporting ideology. It is spreading instability.

And unless we awaken to this reality, we may soon find that the map of Africa has been redrawn—not in borders, but in allegiances. Not in ink, but in blood.

### **The Pincer and the Cage: A Geopolitical Convergence**

In the grand theater of geopolitics, there are moments when disparate actors, driven by divergent motives, nonetheless converge upon a shared objective. Such is the case in Africa today, where the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation—two authoritarian powers with distinct historical legacies and strategic temperaments—have found common cause in the quiet dismantling of the postwar liberal order. Their methods differ in texture, but their choreography is unmistakably coordinated. Together, they form a strategic pincer movement, a geopolitical vise that is slowly, inexorably, closing around the African continent.

This is not the stuff of Cold War nostalgia, nor is it a crude revival of nineteenth-century imperialism. It is something more insidious: a new form of great-power competition that cloaks itself in the language of partnership while practicing the politics of domination. It is a “good cop, bad cop” routine on a continental scale, with African nations cast not as partners, but as subjects—interrogated, manipulated, and ultimately subdued.

China plays the role of the benevolent builder. It arrives with the trappings of modernity: gleaming infrastructure projects, digital connectivity, and the promise of economic uplift. But beneath the surface lies a more calculating design. The ports, railways, and telecommunications networks are not gifts; they are instruments of leverage. The loans that finance them are not investments; they are shackles.

---

<sup>10</sup> Sam Mednick, “The US-Russia battle for influence in Africa plays out in Central African Republic,” *AP News*, 11 September 2024, <https://www.ap.org/>.

And the digital infrastructure—ubiquitous, opaque, and state-controlled—serves not only to connect but to surveil. Beijing’s strategy is not conquest by force, but by fiber-optic cable. It is the construction of a gilded cage, one whose bars are made of debt, data, and dependency.<sup>11</sup>

Russia, by contrast, dispenses with subtlety. It is the feral disruptor, the geopolitical arsonist. Where China builds, Russia breaks. It inserts itself into fragile states through the backdoor of instability—arming militias, propping up juntas, and trading security for sovereignty. Its currency is not capital, but coercion. Its diplomacy is conducted not in embassies, but in barracks. And its objective is not development, but disruption. It severs the ties that bind African nations to the West—military, political, and ideological—and replaces them with a crude bargain: loyalty in exchange for survival.<sup>12</sup>

Together, these strategies are not merely parallel—they are symbiotic. China creates the dependencies; Russia ensures there is no alternative. The Chinese build the cage; the Russians herd the unsuspecting into it. One offers the illusion of progress, the other the reality of fear. And both, in their own way, work to peel the continent away from the democratic, rules-based order and integrate it into a new sphere of influence—one defined not by law, but by power; not by norms, but by necessity.

This emerging order is not merely illiberal—it is post-sovereign. In it, the independence of nations is conditional, their autonomy negotiable, their futures mortgaged to foreign capitals. It is a world in which might makes right, and where the West, through its own strategic lassitude, has ceded the initiative.

The implications are profound. Africa is not a peripheral theater. It is the demographic and resource frontier of the twenty-first century. To lose it to authoritarian influence is not merely to forfeit markets or minerals—it is to surrender the ideological high ground in the defining contest of our time. It is to allow the rules-based order to be hollowed out from its periphery, until it collapses at its core.

The moment is critical, but the outcome is not yet foregone. What is required is not nostalgia for a bygone era of unchallenged primacy, but a sober recognition that the contest is underway—and that it must be met with resolve, resources, and a renewed sense of purpose. For if we do not engage, others will. And they already are.

---

<sup>11</sup> Suneel Kumar, “China’s Digital Expansionism in Africa and the US Counter-Strategies,” *Insight on Africa* 16, no. 2 (July 2024): 146–65, <https://doi.org/>; and Bulelani Jili, “The Spread of Chinese Surveillance Tools in Africa: A Focus on Ethiopia and Kenya,” in *Africa–Europe Cooperation and Digital Transformation*, ed. Chux Daniels, Benedikt Erforth, and Chloe Teevan (London: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>12</sup> Federica Saini Fasanotti, “Russia’s Wagner Group in Africa: Influence, commercial concessions, rights violations, and counterinsurgency failure,” *Brookings Institute*, 8 February 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/>; and Samuel Ramani, “Russia’s New Hybrid Warfare in Africa,” *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, 1 July 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/>.

## America's Abdication: A DIMEFIL Autopsy

In the annals of strategic misjudgment, few errors are as damning—or as baffling—as voluntary withdrawal from a theater of active competition. It is not merely a lapse in judgment; it is a conscious abdication of responsibility, a retreat not from war but from relevance. And in Africa, the United States has chosen, with astonishing consistency, to vacate the field.<sup>13</sup>

This is not a tactical repositioning. It is not a recalibration of priorities. It is a systemic failure—a collapse across the full spectrum of national power, as defined by the DIMEFIL construct. Each pillar, once a source of American strength, now stands diminished, neglected, or altogether abandoned.

Let us begin with diplomacy—the first and most visible currency of power. Presence, in international affairs, is not symbolic; it is substantive. The act of showing up, of maintaining embassies, consulates, and high-level engagement, is not mere protocol—it is projection. It signals seriousness. It affirms commitment. And it is precisely this presence that the United States has allowed to atrophy.

The closure of consulates, the reduction of diplomatic staff, the absence of sustained engagement—these are not administrative decisions. They are strategic signals.<sup>14</sup> And African leaders, attuned to the nuances of global courtship, have read them with perfect clarity. A shuttered embassy is not a neutral act; it is a declaration of disinterest. A vacant ambassadorial post is not a bureaucratic oversight; it is a message of marginalization.

Contrast this with our adversaries. China has institutionalized its diplomatic offensive through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)—a sprawling, meticulously choreographed summit that convenes dozens of African heads of state, not as supplicants, but as honored guests.<sup>15</sup> Russia, too, has followed suit, hosting its own high-profile Africa summits, complete with military parades, economic pledges, and the unmistakable theater of geopolitical courtship.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Milburn, “Out of Africa: The Strategic Mistake of US Disengagement from Somalia,” *Modern War Institute*, 16 September 2021, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/>; Ishaan Tharoor, “The U.S. Is in Retreat in West Africa’s Sahel,” *Washington Post*, 24 April 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>; and John J. Chin and Haleigh Bartos, “Rethinking U.S. Africa Policy amid Changing Geopolitical Realities,” *Texas National Security Review* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2024): 114–33, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>14</sup> Jessica Donati, “Trump Inherits US Embassies in Africa Lacking Staff, Resources,”

<sup>15</sup> Liam Karr, “Africa File, September 12, 2024: China-Africa Forum (FOCAC) Takeaways; Mali and Russia Prepare to Avenge Defeat in Northern Mali,” *Critical Threats*, 12 September 2024, <https://www.understandingwar.org/>.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Frimpong, “Relevance of FOCAC in the Context of ‘Africa+1’ Summitry,” *Africa-China Centre for Policy & Advisory*, June 2024, <https://africachinacentre.org/>.

These are not mere photo opportunities. They are rituals of influence. They are the architecture of alignment. And while Beijing and Moscow build permanent diplomatic infrastructure, Washington offers little more than episodic visits and reactive statements. We have not merely lost the narrative—we have forfeited the stage.

This is not a failure of resources. It is a failure of imagination. A failure to grasp that diplomacy is not a luxury to be indulged in times of peace, but a weapon to be wielded in times of competition. And in Africa, the competition is not looming—it is underway.

If diplomacy is the visible architecture of influence, then information is its animating spirit. And here, too, the United States has chosen retreat over engagement, silence over assertion. In the informational domain, our insouciance is not merely negligent—it is breathtaking.

While Russian troll farms churn out disinformation with industrial efficiency, and Chinese state media saturates the airwaves with slickly produced paeans to authoritarian “stability,” America’s voice has grown faint, even apologetic. Institutions once forged in the crucible of ideological contest—Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty—now languish, underfunded and underutilized, their reach diminished, their mission diluted.

This erosion did not happen overnight. It was institutionalized in 1999, when the once-formidable US Information Agency (USIA)—an instrument forged in the ideological furnace of the Cold War—was quietly folded into the Department of State. What followed was not integration but dilution. Bereft of its independence, stripped of its strategic clarity, and buried under layers of bureaucratic inertia, the USIA’s mission was reduced to a shadow of its former self. As Nicholas J. Cull and Juliana Geran Pilon document, the agency’s demise was less a policy decision than a political afterthought—an act of bureaucratic euthanasia carried out in an era that mistakenly believed the war of ideas had been won.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the deeper failure is not merely institutional—it is philosophical. We have ceased to wage the battle of ideas. We have not articulated, with clarity or conviction, why a partnership with the United States and the West offers a better future than the authoritarian alternative. We have allowed the narrative terrain to be defined by our adversaries, reacting to their lies rather than asserting our truths. In doing so, we have ceded the most vital ground of all: the imagination of the next generation.

Africa’s population is the youngest in the world—a generation rising. With a median age under 20, it is a continent of students, of digital natives, of citizens

---

<sup>17</sup> Nicholas J. Cull and Juliana Geran Pilon, “The Crisis In U.S. Public Diplomacy: The Demise of the U.S. Information Agency,” in *Case Studies Working Group Report*, ed. Richard Weitz (Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 2012): 543–642, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

whose political and cultural identities are still in formation.<sup>18</sup> And into this crucible of emerging consciousness, our adversaries have poured a torrent of anti-American invective—tailored, targeted, and relentless. We, by contrast, have unilaterally disarmed. In the contest for hearts and minds, we have chosen neither.

And then there is the military domain—perhaps the most visible, and certainly the most calamitous, of our retreats.

The recent expulsion of American forces from Niger, and with it the forfeiture of Air Base 201, is not a mere logistical inconvenience. It is a self-inflicted wound of staggering proportions. This was not an outpost in the wilderness. It was the billion-dollar linchpin of our intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) architecture across North and West Africa. It was our eye in the sky, our ear to the ground, our forward presence in a region teetering on the edge of jihadist resurgence.<sup>19</sup>

To abandon it is not a tactical repositioning—it is a strategic capitulation. It is the deliberate blinding of our intelligence apparatus. It is the surrender of terrain not to a superior force, but to inertia and indecision. And the consequences are immediate and dire.

Even before our final departure, Russian Africa Corps personnel were reportedly cohabiting Air Base 101 with American forces—a surreal and humiliating tableau that perfectly encapsulates the new geopolitical reality.<sup>20</sup> We are not being out-gunned; we are being outmaneuvered. We are not being expelled by force; we are being displaced by will.

In this context, the role of space-based tools like the Tactical Surveillance, Reconnaissance, and Tracking (TacSRT) becomes even more critical. Brig Gen Jacob Middleton, commander of US Space Forces Europe–Africa, noted that the TacSRT program’s ability to deliver intelligence “at scale and at the speed of relevance is significant.” During the withdrawal from Air Base 201, the TacSRT was employed to help security forces monitor for potential threats—one of the few operational examples publicly cited. “Anything where you need information at speed and relevance about what’s going on around you is what I’m being asked to provide,”

---

<sup>18</sup> Tariq Khokhar, “Chart: The World’s Youngest Populations Are in Africa,” *Data Blog*, 11 July 2016, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/>; and Nicolas Reuge et al., *Transforming Education in Africa: An Evidence-based Overview and Recommendations for Long-term Improvements* (New York: UNICEF, 2021), <https://www.unicef.org/>.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Welty, “US Completes Withdrawal from AB 201,” *Air Force News*, 6 August 2024, <https://www.af.mil/>; Christopher Korkor, “The Impact of US Withdrawal from the Sahel on Counterterrorism Operational Effectiveness,” *APSA Preprints*, 27 March 2025, <https://doi.org/>; and Philip Reynolds, “Security Conditionality: Evidence and Effectiveness,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 18, no. 1 (2025): 89–116, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>20</sup> Reuters, “Russian troops enter base housing US military in Niger, US official says,” *Voice of America*, 3 May 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/>.

Middleton said.<sup>21</sup> This capability, while not a substitute for physical presence, demonstrates the growing importance of space-enabled situational awareness in contested environments.

In forfeiting Air Base 201, we have traded a forward position for a distant perch. We have exchanged proximity for abstraction. And in doing so, we have crippled our ability to understand, anticipate, and act. We are now spectators in a theater where we once held the stage.

This is not the natural ebb and flow of empire. It is the conscious dismantling of presence, the abdication of responsibility, the retreat of a superpower not from overextension, but from conviction.

In the economic and financial domains, the United States offers a model that is, in theory, unimpeachable—market-driven, transparent, and rooted in the rule of law. But in practice, it is often ponderous, fragmented, and ill-suited to the exigencies of geopolitical competition. We champion private-sector investment, and rightly so. Initiatives like the first Trump administration's Prosper Africa are designed to catalyze commercial engagement, to unlock the dynamism of American enterprise.<sup>22</sup> But the American private sector is not a geopolitical instrument—it is a fiduciary entity. It demands stability, legal clarity, and predictable returns. These are virtues in a mature market; they are liabilities in a volatile one.<sup>23</sup>

China, by contrast, is unburdened by such constraints. It does not wait for market signals or conduct due diligence. It dispatches capital with the speed of command. A single directive from Beijing can green-light a multibillion-dollar infrastructure project—no shareholder meetings, no environmental reviews, no congressional oversight. To an African leader facing restive populations, crumbling infrastructure, and the ever-present specter of political instability, the choice is not ideological—it is temporal. The American offer is principled but slow. The Chinese offer is expedient and unconditional.<sup>24</sup>

The US Development Finance Corporation, though well-intentioned, is shackled by congressional mandates, risk ceilings, and bureaucratic inertia. US aid programs, while noble in aspiration, are often diffuse, encumbered by layers of compliance, and devoid of the visceral impact that a new highway, a gleaming dam, or a functioning

---

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Greg Hedley, "From Europe to Pacific, Space Commanders Want More Commercial Data," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 12 December 2024, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

<sup>22</sup> Aubrey Hraby, *Making the Most of Prosper Africa: Leveraging US Competitiveness in African Markets* (Washington: Atlantic Council, March 2020), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

<sup>23</sup> Ellen J. Odoner et al., *Fiduciary Duties of Corporate Directors in Uncertain Times*, Millstein Center Director Papers (New York: Columbia Law School, August 2017), <https://millstein.law.columbia.edu/>.

<sup>24</sup> Tim Zajontz, *The Political Economy of China's Infrastructure Development in Africa: Capital, State Agency, Debt* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

power grid can deliver. The United States offers process; China offers product. And in the theater of perception, product wins.<sup>25</sup>

But perhaps the most quietly devastating consequence of our retreat is the degradation of our intelligence and law enforcement capabilities—the final, indispensable levers of national power.

Intelligence is not conjured from satellites alone. It is cultivated in whispers, in relationships, in trust painstakingly built over years. It is the CIA officer embedded in a local service, the DEA agent nursing a source in a roadside café, the liaison officer who knows which colonel can be believed and which cannot. These networks are not scalable; they are perishable. And when embassies are downsized, when military bases are shuttered, when presence is replaced by posture, these networks wither.

The result is a blindness that is both operational and strategic. Our ability to track the illicit flows of arms, gold, and narcotics—the lifeblood of both jihadist insurgencies and Russian mercenary operations—is severely compromised. The architecture of transnational crime, once mapped and monitored, now operates in the shadows we have chosen to vacate.

We speak often of combating terrorism and organized crime. We issue statements, publish strategies, and convene task forces. But these are declarations without deployment. The field has been abandoned. And in our absence, malign actors flourish.

This is not merely a lapse in execution. It is a failure of will. A superpower does not lose influence because it is outmatched. It loses influence because it ceases to compete. And in Africa, we have ceased to compete.

### **The High Ground: Reengagement Through the US Space Force**

The path to renewed American engagement in Africa does not lie through the dust-choked corridors of expeditionary warfare, nor through the weary repetition of nation-building experiments that have too often collapsed under their own contradictions. It lies, rather, in the intelligent application of power—precise, persistent, and unencumbered by the liabilities of physical presence. It lies in space.

---

<sup>25</sup> James Roberts and Brett Schaefer, *The U.S. Development Finance Corporation Is Failing to Counter China* (Washington: Heritage Foundation, 17 September 2021), <https://www.heritage.org/>; Shayerah I. Akhtar and Nick M. Brown, *U.S. International Development Finance: Corporation: Overview and Issues*, R47006 (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 10 January 2022), <https://www.congress.gov/>; and A.V. Boreyko, A.A. Vernigora, and S.V. Kislitsyn, “The Infrastructure Competition between the United States and China in Developing Countries,” *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences* 92 (2022): S627–35, <https://doi.org/>.

In this domain, America remains unchallenged. And yet, paradoxically, it is the newest and least understood branch of our armed services—the US Space Force—that holds the key to a sustainable and strategically coherent reengagement with the African continent. Its role is not ancillary. It is foundational.

A recent example of this foundational role occurred on 27 May 2025, when Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTF–HOA) service members participated in the first-ever US Space Force training held at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti. Hosted by the National Security Space Institute, the course introduced joint warfighters to the fundamentals of space operations—including space domain awareness, space law, and both offensive and defensive space capabilities. “It is critically important that joint warfighters understand space capabilities and are able to integrate them into their everyday joint plans and operations,” noted Joseph Spegele, an instructor with the institute. This training not only enhanced the operational readiness of CJTF–HOA personnel but also underscored the Space Force’s growing role in supporting Africa Command’s mission to promote regional stability and protect US and partner interests.<sup>26</sup>

The first and most immediate contribution is in the realm of space-based ISR. As our terrestrial footprint contracts, our need for persistent situational awareness expands. Satellites, unlike embassies or forward operating bases, do not require host nation approval. They do not negotiate status-of-forces agreements. They do not get expelled. They orbit.

And from that orbit, they see everything.

This is not a poor substitute for boots on the ground. It is, in many respects, a superior capability. National technical means can be focused on high-value targets, while the explosion in commercial satellite imagery—driven by private-sector innovation—has democratized access to near-real-time intelligence. The result is a level of transparency that would have been inconceivable a decade ago.

We can now monitor, with forensic precision, the dredging of a Chinese-built port in East Africa and determine whether it is being deepened to accommodate People’s Liberation Army Navy warships. We can track the convoys of the Russian Africa Corps as they shuttle looted gold from the Central African Republic to

---

<sup>26</sup> Micheala Maldonado, “Expanding horizons in East Africa: CJTF-HOA members train with US Space Force” (press release, Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa, 27 May 2025), <https://www.dvidshub.net/>.

airstrips in Libya. We can map the logistical arteries of predation and influence, and we can do so without ever setting foot on contested soil.<sup>27</sup>

This is not merely intelligence—it is ground truth. And it must inform every dimension of American statecraft: every diplomatic *démarche*, every economic sanction, every military contingency. It is the connective tissue that binds our instruments of power into a coherent strategy.

In an era where presence is perilous and access is denied, space is the high ground. And it is from this vantage that America must begin its return.

If space-based intelligence is the eye of American power, then secure communications and position, navigation, and timing (PNT) are its nervous system—silent, invisible, and indispensable. And it is here, in the realm of orbital infrastructure, that the United States possesses not only a technological edge, but a diplomatic instrument of rare potency.<sup>28</sup>

The US Space Force, often caricatured as a futuristic abstraction, is in fact the guarantor of the most fundamental enablers of modern statecraft. Without secure communications, there is no command and control. Without reliable PNT, there is no modern economy, no precision agriculture, no synchronized logistics, no coordinated security operations.<sup>29</sup> These are not luxuries; they are the sinews of sovereignty.

The establishment of US Space Forces in Europe—Space Forces Africa (SPACEFOREUR–AF) further underscores this strategic shift. Activated at Ramstein Air Base on 8 December 2023, SPACEFOREUR–AF is the US Space Force component field command supporting both US European Command and US Africa Command. With a mission scope spanning 51 countries in Europe and 53 in Africa, it is singularly responsible for integrating space forces across two continents. Its operations include space situational awareness and security cooperation, all aimed at enhancing interoperability, resilience, and the long-term sustainability of

---

<sup>27</sup> John R. Hoehn, *Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Design for Great Power Competition*, R46389 (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 4 June 2020), <https://www.congress.gov/>; John Vandiver, “US should be wary of potential for greater Chinese military use of Africa ports, report argues,” *Stars and Stripes*, 13 March 2025, <https://www.stripes.com/>; and US Space Force, “Space Delta 7 - Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance,” April 2024, <https://www.spaceforce.mil/>.

<sup>28</sup> Peter L. Hays and James J. Wirtz, “Enabling National Security through Space: Intelligence and Communications,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Space Security*, ed. Saadia M. Pekkanen and P.J. Blount (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024): 704–25, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>29</sup> Cordell DeLaPena, Jr., “Space Industry Days MilComm & PNT (MCPNT)” (presentation, AFCEA Space Industry Days Briefing, 19 October 2023), <https://afcea-la.org/>; and *Challenges to Security in Space: Space Reliance in an Era of Competition and Expansion, 2022* (Washington: Defense Intelligence Agency, March 2022), <https://www.dia.mil/>.

space. In doing so, SPACEFOREUR–AF plays a pivotal role in reinforcing the international order and safeguarding allied interests from Iceland to South Africa.<sup>30</sup>

By offering African partners access to resilient, jam-resistant satellite communications and GPS-based PNT, the United States provides more than a service—it offers a strategic choice. It empowers African militaries to coordinate counterterrorism operations without fear of interception. It enables governments to build digital economies on a foundation that is open, interoperable, and governed by the rule of law.

If the United States seeks to lead in Africa through orbital means, it must go beyond observation and invest in cooperative space partnerships with African nations. While ISR and SDA provide American policy makers with critical strategic awareness, building trust with regional partners demands shared capability and access. Nigeria’s National Space Research and Development Agency (NASRDA) and South Africa’s South African National Space Agency (SANSA) already operate dual-use satellite programs and collaborate with international partners.<sup>31</sup> These institutions represent valuable nodes for capacity building, data-sharing protocols, and technical cooperation. Engaging them in joint initiatives—not just as recipients of intelligence, but as partners in space-enabled development—offers both strategic and diplomatic dividends. Through programs such as the GPS modernization, satellite-based environmental monitoring, and co-development of earth observation platforms, the United States can empower African states while reinforcing a rule-of-law-based space architecture.

As emphasized by US Space Forces Europe and Africa leadership, “space is a team sport.” The success of space-based strategy in Africa will depend not only on American capabilities but also on the strength of partnerships—with allies, commercial entities, and regional actors. This collaborative approach is not optional; it is foundational to resilience, interoperability, and long-term strategic advantage.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Chris Gordon, “Presence Matters’: Space Force Activates New Component for Europe and Africa,” *Air & Space Force Magazine*, 8 December 2023, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

<sup>31</sup> Rose Croshier, “Recommendations for US–Africa Space Cooperation and Development,” *Center for Global Development Brief*, March 2022, <https://www.cgdev.org/>; Temidayo Oniosun, “Why the United States needs a robust strategy for space cooperation with Africa,” *AfricaSource* (blog), 22 July 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>; Chigomezyo M. Ngwira et al., “Enhancing Scientific Capacity in Africa – A Report on the 2023 International Space Weather Initiative School and the African Geophysical Society Annual Conference,” *JGR Space Physics* 130, no. 2 (February 2025): e2024JA033447, <https://doi.org/>; and Innocent E. Bello, “Space Technology and Geospatial Intelligence for National Security, Good Governance and Development in Africa: A Paradigm Shift,” *World Journal of Innovation and Modern Technology* 9, no. 4 (2025): 36–48, <https://www.researchgate.net/>.

<sup>32</sup> Jacob Middleton, “The U.S. Space Force: Partnering to Win” (keynote speech, GOVSATCOM Conference, Luxembourg, 13 March 2025), <https://www.youtube.com/>.

And herein lies the crux: this is not merely a technical decision. It is a declaration of alignment.

The alternative is China's BeiDou system—a closed, opaque, and politically contingent architecture. To build one's national infrastructure atop BeiDou is to tether one's sovereignty to the whims of Beijing. It is to accept that one's communications, navigation, and timing—indeed, one's very ability to function in the modern world—are subject to the strategic calculus of a foreign power.<sup>33</sup>

The American GPS constellation, by contrast, operates under a transparent legal framework, with public documentation, civilian access, and a track record of reliability unmarred by coercion. It is not a tool of domination; it is a platform of partnership.

The US Space Force's emphasis on commercial partnerships mirrors the broader evolution of the space domain. As Brigadier General Middleton noted, "If we had left the internet solely to the military, it would not meet today's requirements."<sup>34</sup> The same logic applies to space: commercial innovation drives down launch costs, accelerates development, and enhances resilience.

In this sense, the provision of secure space-based services is not a peripheral gesture—it is a central pillar of alliance-building. It is a nonkinetic, nonintrusive, and profoundly consequential way to bind nations together in a shared architecture of trust. It is diplomacy by orbital infrastructure.

And in a world where influence is increasingly measured not by the number of boots on the ground but by the number of satellites overhead, this is the kind of power that endures.

If space-based ISR is the eye, and secure communications the nervous system, then space domain awareness (SDA) is the conscience of American space power—the capacity not merely to see, but to understand, to anticipate, and, if necessary, to deter.<sup>35</sup> It is the quintessential great-power mission, and nowhere is its relevance more acute than in the skies above Africa.

For too long, we have treated orbital space as a neutral backdrop to terrestrial affairs. That illusion is no longer tenable. The orbits above Africa are now contested

---

<sup>33</sup> Rumi Aoyama, "China's dichotomous BeiDou strategy: led by the party for national deployment, driven by the market for global reach," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 11, no. 2 (2022): 282–99, <https://doi.org/>; and Shannon Vaughn, "LEO Wars: China's Orbital Challenge to the US-led Digital Order," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 29 April 2025, <https://www.fpri.org/>.

<sup>34</sup> Middleton, "The U.S. Space Force."

<sup>35</sup> Kevin Pollpeter, *Space Domain Awareness as a Strategic Counterweight* (Maxwell AFB, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, November 2021), <https://www.cna.org/>; and Dennis M. Rice, *Deterrence and Space Strategy: A Framework from the Study of History and Theory*, Schriever Paper 2 (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, December 2023), 46, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

terrain—crowded, surveilled, and increasingly militarized. To cede this domain is not merely to forfeit visibility; it is to surrender initiative. And in a theater where our terrestrial access is constrained, orbital superiority becomes not a luxury, but a necessity.

We must deny our adversaries sanctuary in space. That begins with the most fundamental act of sovereignty in the space domain: knowing what is up there. Every Chinese and Russian satellite that traverses the skies above the continent must be tracked, cataloged, and characterized. This is not paranoia; it is prudence.

Is that new Chinese satellite a benign meteorological platform—or is it conducting multispectral reconnaissance of Congolese rare-earth deposits, mapping the mineral arteries of tomorrow’s supply chains? Is that Russian satellite relaying targeting data to Wagner Group artillery units in the Sahel, transforming orbital telemetry into terrestrial lethality? These are not academic questions. They are the operational queries of a new era of conflict, where the boundary between space and Earth is not a barrier, but a conduit.

To ignore these questions is to allow our adversaries to operate with impunity. To answer them is to impose friction, to reintroduce cost into their calculus. A robust SDA capability allows us to map their orbital order of battle, to detect patterns, to infer intent. And should deterrence fail, it allows us to hold those assets at risk—not recklessly, but deliberately, as part of a calibrated strategy of escalation control.

In this sense, SDA is not merely a technical function. It is a strategic imperative. It is the orbital equivalent of maritime domain awareness in the Cold War: the quiet, constant vigilance that underwrites deterrence and enables diplomacy. It is the difference between being a spectator and being a sovereign actor in the most consequential domain of the twenty-first century.

To lose the ground war is grave. To lose the high ground is fatal.

In the modern contest of nations, the battlefield is not only physical—it is perceptual. The struggle is not merely for territory, but for truth. And in this war of narratives, space is not a passive backdrop; it is a decisive front. The United States must recognize that its space assets are not only instruments of surveillance or deterrence—they are weapons in the informational war, and they must be wielded as such.

The Russian “firehose of falsehood”—a relentless torrent of disinformation, half-truths, and manufactured grievances—cannot be countered with silence or bureaucratic delay. It must be met with a flood of unassailable truth. And that truth, increasingly, comes from above.

When a Russian-backed warlord commits an atrocity in the Central African Republic, and Moscow’s propaganda machine blames it on French peacekeepers or local forces, it is not a press release that will win the argument. It is commercial

satellite imagery, timestamped and geolocated, showing the movement of vehicles, the burn patterns of villages, the presence of uniformed personnel. It is visual evidence, rapidly analyzed and declassified, that can expose the lie to the world within hours.

This is not science fiction. It is a capability we already possess. What we lack is the doctrine—the institutional will to use it proactively, not reactively. We must move beyond the defensive crouch of rebuttal and embrace the offensive posture of strategic truth.

To that end, the US government—through the Space Force and the Intelligence Community—should establish a Strategic Truth Cell: a dedicated unit tasked with the rapid exploitation of overhead imagery to expose malign activity. Its mission would be simple but profound: to make the invisible visible, to make the deniable undeniable.

To move from concept to capability, the Strategic Truth Cell must be situated at the intersection of technical collection and public diplomacy. A joint construct bridging US Space Force, US Space Command, the National Reconnaissance Office, and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency would ensure it has access to the full spectrum of national technical means. The Deputy Director of National Intelligence for Open Source, in coordination with the National Declassification Center, could provide the requisite authorities for rapid imagery declassification. Modeled in part on the Global Engagement Center's coordination function for counter-disinformation, the Strategic Truth Cell would fuse classified and commercial satellite imagery, generate geospatial narratives, and push products to Department of State posts, partner governments, and African media. Its mission would be clear: to visually document and expose malign activity in near-real time—making deniability impossible and truth strategically consequential.

Imagine a regularly published report, disseminated across African capitals and global media, replete with time-lapse satellite photos showing the environmental devastation wrought by an unregulated Chinese cobalt mine. Imagine tracking the flight path of an illicit Iranian arms shipment as it snakes its way through Sudan into the Sahel. Imagine exposing the construction of a covert military facility masquerading as a civilian port.

This is not propaganda. It is truth as strategy—truth as deterrent, truth as alliance-builder, truth as the antidote to authoritarian narrative warfare. In a world awash in lies, the ability to show what is actually happening—objectively, visually, incontrovertibly—is a form of power more potent than any press conference or diplomatic communique.

And space is the ultimate arbiter of that truth. It sees what others hide. It remembers what others deny. It is the final high ground—not just of military advantage, but of moral clarity.

### **Conclusion: A Choice Between Strategy and Decline**

What currently passes for American policy toward Africa is not a strategy—it is a symptom. A symptom of geopolitical fatigue, of a superpower grown weary of its own responsibilities, and of a political class increasingly seduced by the illusion that we can choose the theaters in which history will unfold. But history, like our adversaries, is not so obliging.

While we debate, they act. While we deliberate, they deploy. The Chinese Communist Party and the Kremlin have already made their choice. They have designated Africa—not as a humanitarian project, not as a peripheral concern, but as a central front in their long-term campaign to dismantle the American-led international order. They see what we refuse to acknowledge: that Africa, with its vast reserves of critical minerals, its youthful population, and its strategic geography, is not a continent to be pitied or patronized—it is a prize to be won.

To pretend otherwise is not merely naïve—it is delusional. It is to substitute wishful thinking for policy, and inertia for strategy. And the cost of that delusion will not be measured in abstract metrics. It will be measured in the realignment of global power.

We now face a stark and consequential choice.

We can continue our feckless retreat, content to issue moralistic pronouncements from the sidelines while a continent of 1.4 billion people is methodically absorbed into an authoritarian, extractive orbit. This is the path of least resistance. It is also the path to strategic irrelevance.

Follow it, and we will awaken to a world where the global supply chains for cobalt, lithium, and rare earths run through Beijing; where the maritime chokepoints of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Guinea are patrolled by the People's Liberation Army Navy; where the United Nations General Assembly becomes a reliable echo chamber for anti-Western resolutions, its voting bloc shaped not by shared values but by transactional allegiance.

Or, we can choose to compete.

A renewed American engagement in Africa—anchored not in nostalgia, nor in the burdens of past misadventures, but in the technological supremacy of the US Space Force—is not a call for empire. It is a call for clarity. For realism. For the sober recognition that in the twenty-first century, influence is not sustained by sentiment, nor by the inertia of past prestige. It is sustained by presence. By capability. By the ability to see farther, to act faster, and to offer more than our adversaries can promise.

Power today is not merely projected by boots on the ground. It is projected by satellites in orbit—by the quiet, persistent hum of a constellation that sees what others cannot, that connects what others cannot reach, and that enables action where others are paralyzed by distance or denial. The high ground of space is not metaphorical. It is literal. And it is from this vantage that the United States can reassert its leadership—not through coercion, but through competence.

By leveraging our dominance in this domain, we can offer African nations something neither China nor Russia can: a partnership that enhances sovereignty rather than erodes it. We can provide secure communications that protect national command authority. We can deliver actionable intelligence that helps African forces defeat the very insurgencies our adversaries quietly fund. We can expose the truth—visually, incontrovertibly—when propaganda seeks to enslave minds and rewrite reality.

This is not charity. It is strategy. It is the foundation of a new compact—one built not on dependency, but on mutual interest. Not on paternalism, but on partnership.

And let us be clear: history will not judge kindly an abdication born not of necessity, but of a catastrophic failure of imagination and will. The tools are in our hands. The advantage is ours to lose. The only question is whether we will summon the resolve to use it.

The time for strategic awakening is not tomorrow. It is now.

To revitalize American engagement in Africa and assert leadership in the new great-power competition, the following actions are recommended:

- Institutionalize orbital cooperation with African space agencies (NASRDA, SANSa, etc.) through bilateral memoranda of understanding, capacity-building grants, and joint space missions.
- Stand up a Strategic Truth Cell as a joint unit, empowered to declassify and disseminate satellite imagery that exposes malign state behavior.
- Expand SPACEFOREUR–AF initiatives to include regional liaison officers embedded with African Union space and defense coordination bodies.
- Leverage commercial satellite constellations and cloud-based geospatial analytics platforms to support counterterrorism, anti-trafficking, and anti-exploitation efforts in real time.

This path does not require occupation or coercion. It demands presence, persistence, and the strategic application of truth—delivered at the speed of relevance from the high ground of space. 🦅

**Dr. Ernest Gunasekara-Rockwell**

Dr. Gunasekara-Rockwell is the editor-in-chief of this journal, a peer-reviewed academic quarterly published by Air University Press. His scholarship encompasses a broad spectrum of global security issues, with a focus on geopolitical dynamics and strategic affairs. Dr. Gunasekara-Rockwell frequently guest lectures at the National Foreign Affairs Training Center, the US Air Force Special Operations School, and other institutions of higher education, sharing his expertise on international relations and security strategy. He holds a PhD from the University of Wisconsin.

**Disclaimer**

The views and opinions expressed or implied in CISA are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Department of the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.