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# The COVID-19 Pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa

## An Opportunity to Rethink Strategic Competition on the Continent

**T**he spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) to sub-Saharan Africa in February 2020 spurred concern that the pandemic would have catastrophic consequences for many African countries and international interests on the continent. In March 2020, the *Financial Times* ran a headline that warned, “Africa Faces a Catastrophe to Dwarf All Others.”<sup>1</sup> In early April, *Le Monde* reported that a study by France’s foreign ministry warned that the pandemic would be “one crisis too many” and could pitch several African countries over the edge.<sup>2</sup> Given the recent U.S. prioritization of major-power rivalry, or strategic competition, many in U.S. policy circles likewise worried that a looming crisis in sub-Saharan Africa would be a boon to U.S. competitors, specifically China and Russia. Have such dire predictions come to pass? Has COVID-19 created opportunities for China and Russia to enhance their influence, or have the contours of strategic competition on the continent remained largely the same? Has the pandemic affected the demand

for U.S. government assets in the region, including from the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD)?

Africa is an immensely diverse continent, and the effects of COVID-19 have varied widely across subregions and countries. Overall, the pandemic has caused considerable harm in sub-Saharan Africa, including more than 92,000 deaths at the time of this writing, significant eco-

nomical contraction, and a spike in violence that includes government repression under the guise of COVID-19 precautions.<sup>3</sup> Yet compared with other world regions, sub-Saharan Africa has fared rather well thus far; its infection and death rates have been relatively low, even when one takes into account spiking numbers as part of a worrying “third wave” in June 2021. The pandemic’s ramifications for Chinese and Russian influence appear to have been relatively muted thus far and largely on par with trends before the pandemic. U.S. influence, however, appears to have dropped during the pandemic, at least according to one measure.

In this Perspective, we assess the effects and implications of COVID-19 on strategic competition in sub-Saharan Africa. We proceed in three main sections. First, we provide a brief overview of COVID-19 on the continent, highlighting the damage to public health, the political and economic ramifications, and what has worked thus far in slowing the pandemic. Second, we discuss Chinese and Russian influence, those nations’ attempts to capitalize on the pandemic, and the extent to which COVID-19 has benefited them. Finally, in conclusion, we offer recommendations for how the United States can expand beyond a competition lens and help African countries respond to the pandemic in ways that are mutually beneficial to all parties—including, in some cases, China. Sub-Saharan Africa is of growing importance on the world stage. This trend will only accelerate in the coming years and decades, requiring broader and deeper—and more-strategic—U.S. engagement on the continent.

### Abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
AU	African Union
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CAR	Central African Republic
CDC	Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa)
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
DoD	U.S. Department of Defense
FBIC	Formal Bilateral Influence Capacity
FOCAC	Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
GDP	gross domestic product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
PPE	personal protective equipment
UN	United Nations

## Gauging the Pandemic's Harms

### Public Health Impact

The pandemic's effect on public health in sub-Saharan Africa has been significant. Yet compared with other world regions, its effect has been relatively limited, leaving many scientists and medical doctors scrambling to explain why. As of June 23, 2021, the total number of cases in sub-Saharan Africa was over 3,760,000, and the death count had reached 92,000.<sup>4</sup> With 179,900,000 COVID-19 cases around the world, sub-Saharan Africa represents less than 3 percent of all cases reported globally.<sup>5</sup> Africa's portion of the world's total population is approximately 17 percent.

On a sub-regional basis, Southern Africa has seen the most cases, with more than 2,300,000 reported as of June 23, 2021 (mostly due to South Africa, which has been the hardest hit country in all of sub-Saharan Africa).<sup>6</sup> East Africa and West Africa have had 708,000 and 482,000 cases, respectively, and Central Africa has had 189,000 cases.<sup>7</sup> Many experts agree that COVID-19 cases in Africa are likely underreported, meaning that the real numbers are likely higher, particularly in countries with weak institutions, as in Central Africa. Yet even doubling the numbers still yields a significantly lower human toll than in most of the rest of the world.

Although initial hypotheses to explain this outcome remain just that, experts point to several possible factors. One is the youth of the sub-Saharan African population; another is a degree of immunity resulting from the spread of similar viruses.<sup>8</sup> Other possible contributing factors are the rural nature and lower levels of international exposure in much of sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>9</sup> Many sub-Saharan African governments and nongovernmental organizations

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deserve considerable credit: Broadly speaking, they have performed well at managing public health crises, in part because of their experience with infectious diseases and, in many cases, their preexisting infrastructure. Several West African countries, for example, have recent experience coping with the Ebola outbreak in 2014.<sup>10</sup> Senegal's handling of COVID-19 has been particularly exemplary.<sup>11</sup> In the words of one news report, "Senegal's leaders have delivered clear, consistent, science-based information about the virus and launched an early, aggressive response."<sup>12</sup>

Ghana likewise has distinguished itself by quickly putting in place effective testing and tracing efforts that have included the use of drones to collect testing samples and the dissemination of a contact-tracing phone app.<sup>13</sup> South Africa has benefited from experience managing human immunodeficiency virus and tuberculosis, and the South African government, like many African

governments, responded quickly and vigorously to the COVID-19 threat. Despite the ongoing spread of the virus in South Africa—along with allegations of corruption surrounding COVID-19 aid and police violence during the lockdown—the country has received praise for its early, transparent, and science-based response.<sup>14</sup> Kenya’s response, although likewise facing allegations of police violence,<sup>15</sup> and rising case levels as part of Africa’s third wave, has also been innovative, converting factories into mask production facilities and launching e-learning initiatives.<sup>16</sup> Several countries in sub-Saharan Africa rank at the very top of *Foreign Policy*’s COVID-19 Global Response Index, with Senegal and Ghana both scoring in the top five.<sup>17</sup> Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), created by the African Union (AU) in 2016, has also earned high marks for its forward-leaning and collective approach.<sup>18</sup>

Although more research is needed to better understand what has worked to slow the pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa, recent research from the Africa Center for Strategic Studies has highlighted the “importance of gov-

ernance, transparency, and a free press for combating the pandemic.”<sup>19</sup> Countries in which there is public trust in the government have tended to do well. Regarding factors that make African countries vulnerable to the pandemic, the report found that “size of urban population, relative age of total population, level of press freedom, and international exposure have emerged as the risk factors most closely correlating with reported cases across the continent.”<sup>20</sup>

## Economic Toll

The economic toll of the COVID-19 pandemic has been considerable. It stems from the cumulative effect of public health measures, such as the shuttering of certain businesses, confinement orders, travel bans, and the closing of borders. Sub-Saharan African economies have also been hurt by falling global demand for many commodities and for tourism, and by a sharp decline in income from remittances, as diasporas suffer from the pandemic and associated economic effects in their countries of residence.<sup>21</sup> In April 2021, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) esti-

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mated that the regional economy contracted by  $-1.9$  percent in 2020 and will grow by 3.4 percent in 2021, which would make it the slowest-growing region in the world.<sup>22</sup> The IMF further predicted that the region's real per capita GDP would not return to pre-COVID-19 levels until 2025,<sup>23</sup> that employment decreased by 8.5 percent in 2020, that 32 million people fell into extreme poverty, and that "disruptions to education have jeopardized the prospects of a generation of schoolchildren."<sup>24</sup> The second- and third-order ramifications for African economies and societies are more difficult to assess but are likely to be substantial. That said, some African economies have fared relatively well, especially in the early days of the pandemic, in part because of the relatively muted effect of the pandemic on the continent and innovative e-commerce. In the IMF's April 2021 report, despite predicting relatively low growth overall, they also predicted that 12 sub-Saharan African countries would have growth rates over 5 percent in 2021.<sup>25</sup>

## Political Fallout

Although the pandemic has disrupted elections, prompted protests, and enabled heavy-handed crackdowns by security forces, the direct effects of COVID-19 on political stability are difficult to determine. The pandemic likely has made some situations worse, which might have an important destabilizing effect over the long term. However, identifying the pandemic as a causal factor can be difficult—a challenge akin to deciding whether to attribute a patient's death to COVID-19 or to grave underlying conditions.

Perhaps the clearest example of COVID-19 aggravating politically fraught situations is its effect on elections. In some cases, governments have cancelled or postponed

elections because of the pandemic, prompting not-unreasonable accusations that governments are trying to exploit COVID-19 to cling to power. In other instances, governments have gone ahead with elections, prompting criticism for putting voters at risk or for continuing the electoral process despite potentially depressed voter turnout.<sup>26</sup> The evidence shows an uptick in political protests that might be attributable to the pandemic. Some of the protests clearly are tied to COVID-19; for example, people have protested pandemic-related restrictions. Other protests focus on other issues, and COVID-19 may or may not have been what drove protestors to take to the streets.<sup>27</sup>

The pandemic has led to a spike in state violence targeting civilians, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED).<sup>28</sup> Some of that violence, but not all of it, was related to enforcing COVID-19-related public health measures, and, in several countries, governments have used the pandemic as a pretext to constrain civil liberties. At the same time, anti-government violence has been increasing, although ACLED argues that it would be incorrect to blame the pandemic; rather, ACLED points

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to preexisting weaknesses on the part of state forces and, where relevant, reliance on United Nations (UN) forces to maintain control.<sup>29</sup> For example, Islamist violence in Africa, including the Sahel region and East Africa, has been climbing steadily through 2020 and 2021, but, given the trends over the past three years, there is no real basis for attributing the most-recent increase to COVID-19 alone.<sup>30</sup> The pandemic may have hindered local or international security forces from doing their jobs, but there is limited evidence to confirm this supposition. It is also unclear how or whether insurgents or terrorists have acted to take advantage of the fact that security forces might be less effective because of the pandemic.

The pandemic has taken a direct toll on some African governments, including the deaths of the presidents of Tanzania and Burundi (the latter was scheduled to leave office in August) and a handful of other senior officials

across the continent.<sup>31</sup> These and other losses, however, thus far have not directly resulted in serious bouts of political instability, although in some cases they may have exacerbated preexisting tensions, such as police violence in Kenya and Nigeria.

## **Strategic Competitors**

Africa is of increasing importance for global strategic competition, garnering considerable interest and investments from China and, to a lesser extent, Russia.<sup>32</sup> China's interests are primarily economic, while Russia's are mainly in security. In 2010, South Africa, one of the continent's regional powers, joined the BRICS, a multilateral grouping of countries that is composed of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa and that presents itself as an alternative to Western dominance in multilateral fora. Although outside the scope of this analysis, other countries with expanding interests in Africa include Iran, Israel, India, Turkey, and the Gulf countries. The pandemic thus far has not been a boon to China and Russia in the sense that it has not thrown sub-Saharan governments, civil society, or the public at large into their arms, at least not in a way that has significantly outpaced previous trends. China has made an effort to use the pandemic as an opportunity to demonstrate solidarity and distribute vaccines. The results, however, have been mixed. Russian efforts are relatively negligible, in keeping with the considerably smaller scale of Russian involvement in the region. That said, by one measure, U.S. influence appears to have fallen during the pandemic.<sup>33</sup>

## China

### Pre-Pandemic Trends

Chinese influence in sub-Saharan Africa is real, and it is significant. What is less certain is how the COVID-19 pandemic affects Chinese influence. Chinese engagement primarily has been on the economic front, with a small but growing security presence. Chinese soft power on the African continent is also considerable. China has made a concerted and coordinated effort to cultivate soft power through a variety of means, among them splashy aid and development projects (most recently the Belt and Road Initiative [BRI], which is not exclusively focused on Africa); diplomatic initiatives, including triennial China-Africa summits; propaganda intended to shape African public opinion; and the passage of a large and growing number of African students in Chinese universities.<sup>34</sup> China's most important strategic partner in sub-Saharan Africa has been South Africa, which is followed by Nigeria, Angola, Sudan, and Ethiopia, according to a 2018 RAND Corporation study.<sup>35</sup>

Another big pull for China is business: Billions of dollars' worth of business ventures and deals have proved useful in opening doors. Since 2005, Chinese investments and construction in sub-Saharan Africa have totaled \$304 billion.<sup>36</sup> China invested over a third of that amount in 13 different countries, with Nigeria receiving the most investment, at nearly \$41 billion. The countries with the next-greatest investment levels are Ethiopia (\$24 billion), Angola (\$24 billion), Zambia (\$17 billion), and Kenya (\$16 billion).<sup>37</sup> China has also provided approximately \$36 billion in development aid to Africa from 2000 to 2014.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, in 2009, China overtook the United

States to become Africa's largest trading partner, a title it still holds.<sup>39</sup>

Much attention has focused on the possibility of African countries falling into "debt traps" set by China.<sup>40</sup> Several countries have found themselves unable to handle debts to China, which has lent an estimated \$142 billion to African countries since 2000, with the result that Chinese interests have, in some instances, taken control of valuable assets.<sup>41</sup> Whether and how much that translates into China influencing those countries' policies remains to be seen. Some researchers also dispute the contention that Chinese officials are setting traps as a question of policy. Chinese lending, they contend, is not coordinated or orchestrated; BRI is not centralized; and blame for unwise borrowing falls squarely at the feet of regional governments.<sup>42</sup>

China's security assistance to sub-Saharan Africa has also garnered considerable attention, yet China's toehold in the security realm remains relatively small compared with the economic front. China primarily has been working through the AU and the UN to support peacekeeping operations, which has meant investing money and deploying Chinese soldiers.<sup>43</sup> China has also contributed to international anti-piracy efforts in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>44</sup> The most striking step has been the establishment, in 2017, of a military base in Djibouti, in close proximity to the U.S. and French installations there. In 2018, China hosted a first "China-Africa Defense and Security Forum."<sup>45</sup>

China also sells arms and provides some training.<sup>46</sup> China accounts for 19 percent of all arms imports into sub-Saharan Africa, exporting \$521 million in arms to 11 African countries from 2015 through 2019.<sup>47</sup> The top five recipients of Chinese arms exports were Sudan (\$131 million), Zambia (\$65 million), Mauritania (\$59 million),

Nigeria (\$58 million), and Angola (\$37 million).<sup>48</sup> Chinese security activities have had a different focus from those of the United States. While U.S. military training abroad emphasizes democratic civilian control of the military, Chinese assistance promotes a fusion of ruling parties and the military.<sup>49</sup> The Chinese also have paired their security assistance with economic development and commercial efforts.

### Pandemic Response

China has attempted to increase its influence in Africa during the pandemic in two primary ways. The first consists of soft power and Chinese efforts to curry goodwill through pandemic-related aid. The second is financial: Many African countries have borrowed significant amounts of money from China, and servicing the resulting debts amid an economic recession becomes an ever-heavier burden. At the same time, cash-strapped African countries might be more inclined to make disadvantageous deals with Chinese firms or the Chinese government and feel less free to push back against Chinese activities.

China's pandemic-related aid has been extensive and high-profile, particularly in the early days of the pandemic. The Chinese government and Chinese civilian organizations, most notably the Jack Ma Foundation, have shipped millions of tests, masks, and other personal protective equipment (PPE) and have deployed medical teams to more than a dozen African countries.<sup>50</sup> In June 2020, China held a virtual "Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity Against COVID-19," at which Chinese President Xi Jinping gave a keynote address titled "Defeating COVID-19 with Solidarity and Cooperation."<sup>51</sup> According to the Chinese government's Forum on China-Africa

Cooperation (FOCAC) website, the summit was a "joint initiative" among China, South Africa, and Senegal, the last country being the cochair of the forum. Attendees reportedly included the presidents of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Gabon, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. Together, these countries represent a substantial proportion of sub-Saharan Africa's population. Nigeria, Ethiopia, Congo, South Africa, and Kenya are sub-Saharan Africa's first, second, third, fifth, and sixth most populous nations, respectively. More recently, China also has ramped up efforts to distribute a COVID-19 vaccine in Africa.<sup>52</sup> China has pledged to donate or sell at "favorable prices" approximately half a billion COVID-19 vaccines to 40 African countries.<sup>53</sup>

Chinese efforts to burnish the country's image in Africa during the pandemic have not been without failures. For example, not all African students return from China with a favorable impression. In March and April 2020, reports surfaced of African students being particularly mistreated amid the pandemic, which inflamed African public opinion to a significant and perhaps unprecedented degree.<sup>54</sup> The pandemic also has upped pressure on China to forgive loans to African countries. China dragged its feet before President Xi, at the June summit, announced that China would cancel its interest-free loans. But interest-free loans reportedly account for less than 5 percent of Chinese loans to African countries.<sup>55</sup>

According to Afrobarometer, a pan-African public attitudes survey, in 2016, Africans in 36 sub-Saharan countries generally expressed a positive view of Chinese economic and political influence in their countries. Of those surveyed, 63 percent asserted that China's influence

was “somewhat” or “very” positive.<sup>56</sup> The partially released results of a 2020 update covering 18 countries—largely completed prior to the COVID-19 outbreak—indicates that the number has decreased only slightly; 59 percent of respondents deemed China’s influence to be “somewhat” or “very” positive.<sup>57</sup> Although the United States ranked a close second, at 58 percent, the results also showed that the United States remains the preferred “model for development” in sub-Saharan Africa compared with China (32 percent compared with 23 percent). Another measure shows more worrying results for the United States. Data from the Formal Bilateral Influence Capacity (FBIC) Index, which calculates the “influence capacity” that one country has over another (although it is heavily weighted on trade), reveal that Chinese influence has increased significantly since 2000 and now outweighs U.S. influence in most African countries. More worryingly, the data from 2019–2020 show that U.S. influence appears to be on a downswing that outpaces previous trends (Figure 1).<sup>58</sup> Prominent African commentators have argued that the West offers no real alternative to BRI and is instead “satisfied with virtue signaling when it comes to Africa’s prosperity.”<sup>59</sup>

In sum, thus far, the pandemic appears not to have been a substantial net gain or loss for Chinese influence in sub-Saharan Africa; any shifts appear to be marginal. By one measure, however, U.S. influence appears to be falling more quickly than over the past two decades.

## Russia

### Pre-Pandemic Trends

Russia’s footprint in sub-Saharan Africa is significantly smaller than China’s, owing in part to Russia’s considerably

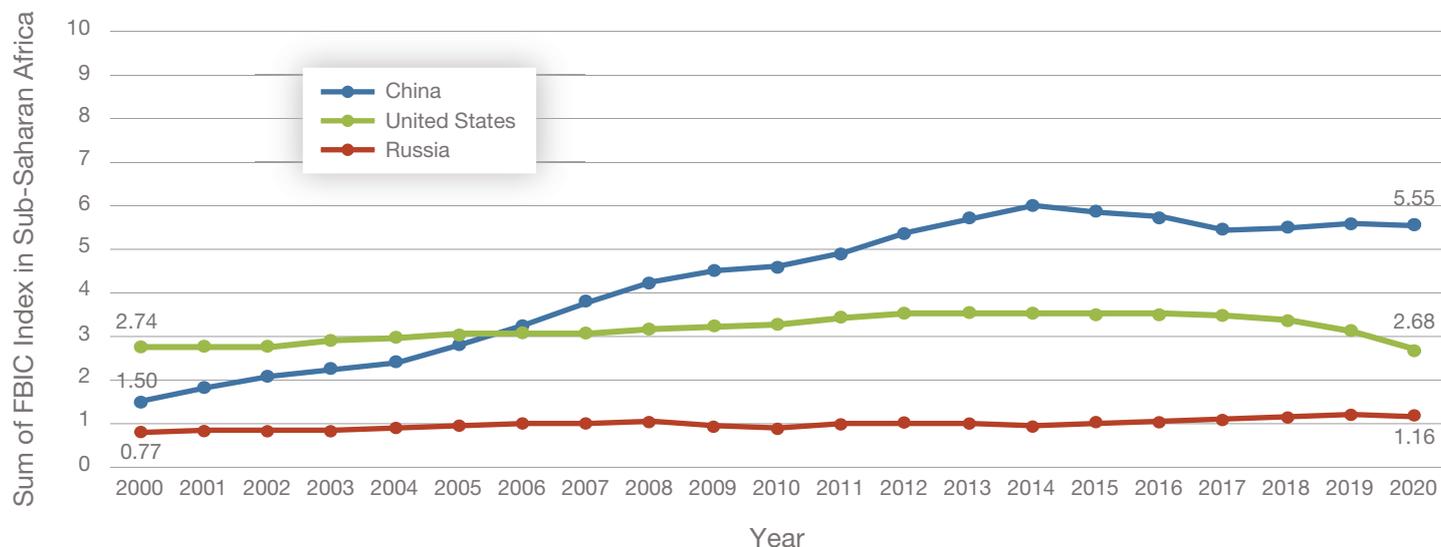
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smaller economic investments. Although public and systematic data on Russian investments in sub-Saharan Africa are limited, various Russian-African business opportunities have gained attention, such as in the energy and natural resources sectors. According to the World Integrated Trade Solution, sub-Saharan trade with Russia was \$3.79 billion in 2018, and, although this number has been increasing since 2000, it is small in comparison with the \$82.58 billion and \$27.85 billion values of trade with China and the United States, respectively.<sup>60</sup> As a point of comparison, another emerging player on the continent, Turkey, also conducted more trade with sub-Saharan Africa than did Russia in 2018, with total trade valued at \$4.55 billion.<sup>61</sup> Russian commercial engagement in North Africa is more robust, but it is beyond the scope of this piece.

Russia has been trying to strengthen its relationship with sub-Saharan African countries by engaging in a dip-

FIGURE 1  
Outward Influence Capacity in Sub-Saharan Africa



lomatic offensive that included hosting a summit in Sochi in 2019.<sup>62</sup> Russian moves have been particularly concerning to France, which is sensitive to Russian encroachment in its former colonies, especially in the Sahel. Two Russian activities attract particular concern: Russian influence operations, usually via WhatsApp, Facebook, and other social media, in the form of anti-Western misinformation common to Russian news outlets, such as RT and Sputnik; and the activities of Russian private security contractors.

Russian influence operations use the internet or WhatsApp to spread disinformation, often simply by disseminating articles that originated in Sputnik or RT.<sup>63</sup> A significant portion of Russian efforts target francophone Africa and appear to target France in particular.<sup>64</sup> Some of

the information propagated by the Russians is patently false and is intended to damage the reputation of France and the United States; other reports simply emphasize negative information and contribute to overall messaging. There is little available evidence showing that such operations have worked to substantially change Africans' views. There have been allegations of a Russian hand in anti-French and pro-Russian protests in Mali, but there has been limited evidence thus far to back such claims. That said, discontent regarding the foreign presence in Mali, although driven by factors that are unrelated to anything that Russia might be doing, could be exploited by Russia.

Russian arms trade with sub-Saharan Africa is substantial. Russia was the primary exporter of arms to Africa

from 2015 to 2019, accounting for 36 percent of all arms imports.<sup>65</sup> Russia sold arms to 13 African nations at a value of \$979 million; over half went to Angola (\$501 million).<sup>66</sup> Russia sold a fraction of that to Nigeria (\$159 million), Sudan (\$125 million), Ethiopia (\$69 million), and Rwanda (\$27 million). In addition, Russia recently has ramped up the use of private security contractors in sub-Saharan Africa. Russia deploys contractors as an arm of state policy, a means to establish and strengthen relationships that can be both commercially profitable (because of access to some natural resources) and politically useful in terms of access and influence.<sup>67</sup>

For instance, Russian security firms in 2017 began supplying weapons to the Central African Republic (CAR), a country with a close historical relationship with France and the site of multiple French military interventions. Russian security contractors have also been deployed to CAR to guard mining projects and provide training to Central African security forces, and, more recently, contractors have been deployed to Mozambique. Russia also provides security assistance to Sudan while receiving preferential access to gold mines.<sup>68</sup> In 2018, in Madagascar, Russian contractors interfered in a presidential election in favor of the incumbent (who lost), apparently as part of a deal to win a Russian firm the contract to operate a chromite mine.<sup>69</sup> Russian contractors have been accused of widespread human rights abuses.<sup>70</sup> Building on Cold War ties, Russia has also established what might be described as small-scale security assistance relationships with several other African countries. Thus far, the Russian security presence has been relatively limited, but its ambitions appear to be expanding. Russia has a training base in CAR, although its status is unclear.<sup>71</sup> There are reports of Russian

plans to build as many as six bases on the continent,<sup>72</sup> and, in December 2020, Russia inked an agreement with Sudan to host a Navy base for 25 years (although the deal was put on hold in April 2021).<sup>73</sup>

## Pandemic Response

Russia's efforts to capitalize on COVID-19 have been limited compared with those of China. This suggests Russia's limited capacity amid its own internal challenges and also serves as a reminder that Africa is not a major priority for Russia.<sup>74</sup> According to the Russian News Agency, in 2020, 29 African countries asked Russia for pandemic-related aid.<sup>75</sup> Only a handful of countries, including Guinea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, and South Africa,<sup>76</sup> have received such aid, and with none of the "splash" of Chinese efforts.<sup>77</sup> More recently, Russia has offered 300 million vaccination doses through the AU.<sup>78</sup>

It remains unclear whether COVID-19 has in any way shaped Russian influence or operations on the continent. According to the FBIC Index, Russian influence in sub-Saharan Africa has increased relatively little over the past two decades. Apart from Russia's recent vaccine push, the country's relatively meager early efforts to exploit COVID-19 to expand its influence in sub-Saharan Africa likely further reveal its relatively limited ambitions and levels of engagement on the continent. Compared with China, Russia barely registers. Indeed, other important outside actors in sub-Saharan Africa, among them Iran and Turkey, are deserving of more attention given their high levels of engagement, particularly at the civil-society level.

## A Way Forward

A host of preexisting conditions in sub-Saharan Africa—including largely weak health care and sanitation systems, dense urban populations, and ongoing conflict—threatened to make the continent a hot spot for the pandemic. COVID-19 undoubtedly has caused significant harm in sub-Saharan Africa, including more than 92,000 deaths, economic contraction, and abuse at the hands of security forces. However, widespread fears that the pandemic would be “one crisis too many” have not yet been realized. Compared with other world regions, the continent has largely fared quite well thus far, although the onset of a third wave is increasingly worrying. The reasons require further study but include such factors as the continent’s young population, effective and vigorous responses by governments that have demonstrated creativity and reflected prior experience with public health crises, and perhaps a measure of immunity owing to other viruses.<sup>79</sup>

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Compared with other world regions, Africa has largely fared quite well thus far, although the onset of a third wave is increasingly worrying.

Although the first-order effects of the pandemic appear limited in sub-Saharan Africa, the long-term ramifications—in the region and beyond—could lead to critical changes in international engagement on the continent further down the road, including likely shifts in levels of outside aid and investment. The shift of public health resources to COVID-19 is also likely to have profound consequences for other public health challenges. The low level of vaccination on the continent is the most worrying short-term threat, with potentially severe long-term effects for the continent, U.S. interests, and global efforts to stamp out the pandemic. Currently, Africa has vaccinated significantly less of its population than other regions. Less than 3 percent of Africans have received at least one vaccine dose.

With respect to global strategic competition, thus far China and Russia have been unable to successfully exploit the pandemic to significantly boost their influence. Russia’s efforts to exploit the virus have been more of a whimper than a bang. China has been more active at exploiting the virus, but its efforts in no way have been a clear-cut success. Yet U.S. influence, by one measure, is on a worrying downswing. It should not be lost on U.S. policymakers that the United States—having signaled its disinterest in and a potential drawdown from the region under the Trump administration, combined with its own fumbled COVID-19 response—is unlikely to reverse this trend without a significant rethink. Ironically, the best way to do this is to open the aperture and expand U.S.-Africa policy beyond a competition lens. While the Biden administration has already made significant changes along these lines, we offer two sets of long-term and short-term recommenda-

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In the short term, the United States would be wise to help the region stamp out and recover from the pandemic in a way that aligns with U.S. policy and strategic goals and simultaneously limits the negative effects of Chinese and Russian influence.

tions that would help the continent recover and advance U.S. interests in a way that is mutually beneficial to all.

Sub-Saharan Africa is of growing importance on the international stage, with a fast-growing population (by 2050, one-quarter of the world's population will be African<sup>80</sup>), expanding trade and growing economies, and increasing influence in multilateral fora and international peace and security.<sup>81</sup> As argued in a May 2020 special report in *The Economist* titled “The African Century,” these trends are set to accelerate in the coming years and decades.<sup>82</sup>

Sub-Saharan Africa's increasing prominence has significant implications for U.S. interests. While the Biden administration has taken some promising first steps in this direction, broader, deeper, more-respectful, and more-sustained U.S. involvement across a host of policy areas—including development and humanitarian assistance (with a particular focus on ramping up ongoing vaccination efforts), governance, rule of law, free trade, and security—will help foster more-robust relationships that are beneficial to both U.S. interests and African gov-

ernments and populations. This recalibrated, long-term approach would require a whole-of-government effort involving multiple U.S. departments and agencies—with the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), DoD, and the U.S. Department of Commerce all playing prominent yet complementary roles. Because resources are limited, to get the most return on investment, U.S. policymakers should consider prioritizing the sub-Saharan African countries that have the largest populations, the greatest influence in their neighborhoods, shared values and interests with the United States, and those that have been particularly valuable partners to the United States.

In the short term, the United States would be wise to help the region stamp out and recover from the pandemic in a way that aligns with U.S. policy and strategic goals and simultaneously limits the negative effects of Chinese and Russian influence. COVID-19 presents the U.S. government with a valuable opportunity to refocus its engagement and bolster its image in sub-Saharan Africa, clarifying what it stands for as opposed to merely criticizing the

Chinese. It could do this by ramping up investments in efforts to improve governance, anti-corruption efforts, and development, not to mention humanitarian assistance and pandemic-related aid, including vaccine development, distribution, and collaboration. Indeed, ramping up vaccination efforts in Africa should be the most urgent near-term priority.<sup>83</sup> Recent research from the Africa Center for Strategic Studies shows that good governance, rule of law, and freedom of the press matter greatly in successfully fighting COVID-19 on the continent. Good-governance issues have long been central to U.S. policy in sub-Saharan Africa, and these aims stand in stark contrast to Chinese and Russian goals of exporting authoritarianism.

For DoD, and the U.S. Air Force in particular, sub-Saharan Africa's resilience to COVID-19 means that there is unlikely to be an immediate surge in demand for assets or operations on the continent. That said, they should consider ramping up humanitarian assistance and disaster

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The finding that good governance and rule of law are critical to successfully combating COVID-19 in sub-Saharan Africa should inform DoD's thinking.

response missions focused on helping African countries respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, including support to ongoing vaccination efforts, as appropriate. Other potential short-term measures for DoD include increased and more-generous security cooperation terms and a ramp-up of virtual security cooperation efforts.

The finding that good governance and rule of law are critical to successfully combating COVID-19 in sub-Saharan Africa should also inform DoD's thinking. DoD, including the U.S. Air Force, is well placed to reinvigo-rate and expand support to African partners that focuses on building defense institutions and other training that focuses on fostering civilian control of the military, transparency, and accountability. Again, countries to focus on might include the most populous, most influential, and most committed partners. It will be especially important to prioritize this type of support to fledgling democracies that are genuinely committed to improving their civil-military relations and human rights records.

In some important policy areas—particularly military access, democracy support, and telecommunications<sup>84</sup>—the United States is often in direct competition with China and Russia in sub-Saharan Africa. Yet U.S. policy on the continent need not be zero-sum, and many Africans are sensitive to indications that the United States is interested in them only as the object of a tug-of-war with China.<sup>85</sup> Numerous African officials and heads of state have warned about the dangers of being caught in a cross fire between the United States and China and have urged that cooperation is necessary, particularly amid the COVID-19 crisis. In February 2021, John Nkengasong, leader of Africa CDC, stated: “Africa will refuse to be that playing ground

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Sub-Saharan Africa's innovative responses to the pandemic demonstrate that the continent should play a larger and more influential role in setting the global agenda and that international policymakers have much to learn from African solutions to non-African problems.

where we use COVID as a tool to manage relationships.”<sup>86</sup> W. Gyude Moore, a former government official from Liberia, likewise has encouraged Africans not to pick sides in what he describes as a coming “Cold War” between China and the United States.<sup>87</sup>

A purely oppositional policy approach from the United States, therefore, is likely to backfire. The United States instead should focus on identifying areas of convergence in sub-Saharan Africa and working cooperatively with allies—including France and the United Kingdom—and emerging powers on achieving mutually advantageous objectives. The United States and China set such a precedent with their joint support to West African countries during the Ebola crisis, working together in Sierra Leone and Liberia.<sup>88</sup> The United States and China also have historically worked together to combat piracy in the region.

Sub-Saharan Africa's innovative responses to the pandemic demonstrate that the continent should play a larger and more influential role in setting the global agenda and that international policymakers have much to learn from African solutions to non-African problems. Africa's

rise on the global stage demands more high-level attention and respectful engagement from the United States. While COVID-19 continues to cause considerable damage, the pandemic has also created new opportunities for the United States, other established and emerging powers, and African governments to work in concert with one another. A joint U.S.-China focus on COVID-19 assistance, especially multilateral vaccination efforts and debt relief, could serve as the basis for future cooperation in other areas in which U.S. and Chinese interests align, including peacekeeping, anti-piracy efforts, climate change, and transparent infrastructure development, for starters. A coordinated international push for increasing and expanding open markets, trade, and foreign direct investment in sub-Saharan Africa—including investments in Africa-based solutions to COVID-19 and support for the nascent African Continental Free Trade Area—likewise would be beneficial to all.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Watkins, 2020.
- <sup>2</sup> Bobin and Tilouine, 2020.
- <sup>3</sup> The African Union’s (AU’s) CDC (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention) Dashboard tracks cases, deaths, and recoveries for the entire continent. For this analysis, we excluded the data of Northern Africa, except for Mauritania, which we consider to be part of sub-Saharan Africa for this report. See Africa CDC, 2021. For an example of reports of violence associated with COVID restrictions, see Olewe, 2020.
- <sup>4</sup> Africa CDC, 2021.
- <sup>5</sup> Johns Hopkins University, undated.
- <sup>6</sup> Africa CDC, 2021.
- <sup>7</sup> Africa CDC, 2021.
- <sup>8</sup> Nordling, 2020.
- <sup>9</sup> Gygli et al., 2019.
- <sup>10</sup> Karim, 2020; Maxmen, 2020.
- <sup>11</sup> Shesgreen, 2020.
- <sup>12</sup> Shesgreen, 2020.
- <sup>13</sup> Zhang, Nonvignon, and Mao, 2020.
- <sup>14</sup> Devermont and Mukulu, 2020.
- <sup>15</sup> Allan-Namu and Riley, 2020.
- <sup>16</sup> Travaly and Mare, 2020.
- <sup>17</sup> Foreign Policy Analytics, 2020.
- <sup>18</sup> Burchard, 2020.
- <sup>19</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020a.
- <sup>20</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020a.
- <sup>21</sup> Collier, 2020.
- <sup>22</sup> IMF, 2021, p. 3.
- <sup>23</sup> IMF, 2021, p. V.
- <sup>24</sup> IMF, 2021, p. VI.
- <sup>25</sup> IMF, 2021, p. 24.
- <sup>26</sup> Asplund and Akinduro, 2020; “COVID-19 Further Complicates Holding Free and Fair Elections in Africa,” 2020; Zelalem, 2020.
- <sup>27</sup> Ramdeen, 2020.
- <sup>28</sup> Pavlik, 2020.
- <sup>29</sup> Pavlik, 2020.
- <sup>30</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020b; Jones, 2019.
- <sup>31</sup> “Burundi Ex-President Pierre Buyoya Dies from Covid-19,” 2020; “John Magufuli: Tanzania’s President Dies Aged 61 After Covid Rumours,” 2021.
- <sup>32</sup> Adibe, 2019; Scobell et al., 2018.
- <sup>33</sup> Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver, undated.
- <sup>34</sup> On the subject of African students in China, see Jack, 2020; Makundi, 2020; and “There Are More African Students than Ever in China. Why Are They Still Alienated?” 2020. On the subject of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), see Tiezzi, 2020. The FOCAC website emphasizes China-Africa cooperation on “solidarity against COVID-19,” (FOCAC, undated). On the subject of Chinese propaganda in Africa, see Olander, 2019. For a report on Chinese propaganda globally, see Cook, 2020. For a brief overview on BRI in Africa, see Dollar, 2019.
- <sup>35</sup> Scobell et al., 2018.
- <sup>36</sup> American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation, undated.
- <sup>37</sup> American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation, undated.
- <sup>38</sup> AidData, 2017.
- <sup>39</sup> Dews, 2014. For a current look at China’s trading partners, see World Integrated Trade Solution, undated b.
- <sup>40</sup> Flan, Koné, and Silwé, 2020; Moore, 2020a; Selormey, 2020.
- <sup>41</sup> China-Africa Research Initiative and Johns Hopkins University, 2020; Paduano, 2020.
- <sup>42</sup> Jones and Hameiri, 2020.
- <sup>43</sup> Kovrig, 2018.

- <sup>44</sup> Chambas et al., 2017.
- <sup>45</sup> Benabdallah, 2018.
- <sup>46</sup> Hendrix, 2020.
- <sup>47</sup> Wezeman et al., 2020.
- <sup>48</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2020.
- <sup>49</sup> Nantulya, 2020.
- <sup>50</sup> Mwangi, 2020; Shiferaw, 2020.
- <sup>51</sup> FOCAC, 2020.
- <sup>52</sup> McGowan, 2021; Wee, 2020.
- <sup>53</sup> “China Says Providing Vaccines to Almost 40 African Nations,” 2021.
- <sup>54</sup> “China: Covid-19 Discrimination Against Africans,” 2020; Makundi, 2020.
- <sup>55</sup> Paduano, 2020.
- <sup>56</sup> Lekorwe et al., 2016.
- <sup>57</sup> Selormey, 2020.
- <sup>58</sup> Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver, undated.
- <sup>59</sup> Olander, 2020.
- <sup>60</sup> World Integrated Trade Solution, undated a.
- <sup>61</sup> World Integrated Trade Solution, undated a.
- <sup>62</sup> Delorme, 2020.
- <sup>63</sup> Alba and Frenkel, 2020; Grossman, 2019; Limonier, 2019.
- <sup>64</sup> Limonier, 2019.
- <sup>65</sup> Wezeman et al., 2020.
- <sup>66</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2020.
- <sup>67</sup> Borshchevskaya, 2020; Stronski, 2020.
- <sup>68</sup> Borshchevskaya, 2020.
- <sup>69</sup> Marten, 2020, p. 8; Schwirtz and Borgia, 2019.
- <sup>70</sup> Walsh, 2021.
- <sup>71</sup> “Russia in Africa: Inside a Military Training Centre in CAR,” 2019.
- <sup>72</sup> Balestrieri, 2020; Borshchevskaya, 2020.
- <sup>73</sup> Isachenkov, 2020; “Sudan Reportedly Suspends Planned Russian Naval Base,” 2021.
- <sup>74</sup> Tchoubar, 2020.
- <sup>75</sup> “Africa Asks Russia for Coronavirus Aid: Foreign Ministry,” 2020.
- <sup>76</sup> “Twenty-Nine African States Have Sought Russia’s Help in Fight Against Pandemic,” 2020.
- <sup>77</sup> Klomegah, 2020.
- <sup>78</sup> Bavier and Lewis, 2021.
- <sup>79</sup> Yaqinuddin, 2020.
- <sup>80</sup> “Africa’s Population Will Double by 2050,” 2020.
- <sup>81</sup> United Nations Peacekeeping, 2020.
- <sup>82</sup> “Africa Is Changing So Rapidly, It Is Becoming Hard to Ignore,” 2020.
- <sup>83</sup> For more on the need to step up vaccination efforts, see Usman, 2021.
- <sup>84</sup> Devermont, 2018.
- <sup>85</sup> For a similar argument, see Gavin, 2021.
- <sup>86</sup> Bavier and Lewis, 2021.
- <sup>87</sup> Moore, 2020.
- <sup>88</sup> Aboaf, 2019.

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## About This Perspective

In this Perspective, the authors assess the effects and implications of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) on strategic competition in sub-Saharan Africa and offer recommendations for how the United States can expand beyond a competition lens and help African countries respond to the pandemic in ways that are mutually beneficial to all parties.

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