

How a U.S.-Africa Business Summit Could Launch a New Era of U.S.-Africa Relations

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Introduction

As the Trump administration enacts transformative changes to how the United States engages with the world, U.S.-Africa relations stand at a critical juncture, providing a unique opportunity to redefine and reframe the relationship. The move away from traditional aid models,¹ the redesign of American diplomacy, the new approach to U.S. trade relationships,² and the clear alignment between America's leadership in artificial intelligence (AI) and other digital technologies along with Africa's collective desire to use technology as a development driver will fundamentally alter the landscape of engagement, making it imperative to establish a coherent, commerce-driven approach to U.S.-Africa relations.

In a promising development that aligns with these imperatives, the Trump administration has announced plans to host a U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit focused on trade and investment later this year.³ The senior bureau official at the State Department's Bureau of African Affairs, Troy Fitrell, said the summit "will prioritize exchange between partners and relations between equals" and is expected to take place in New York. The

primary invitees will be business leaders, and the focus will be on commercial interests. One recommendation would be to call it what it is by changing the name from a leader's summit to a business summit. This would also put the Trump stamp on it, because the Barack Obama and Joe Biden administrations hosted U.S.-Africa Leaders Summits and focused on political issues (such as conflict mitigation and democracy promotion). This initiative should be applauded and represents a significant step toward implementing the vision of establishing a modernized relationship with the continent that emphasizes commercial engagement over traditional aid.

Such a summit would provide a platform to reintroduce America to a select group of African partners and project an overarching message that the United States wants to do business with Africa. It could also make clear the summit's three strategic priorities: the mutual benefits of transitioning from aid to trade; the geostrategic benefits within a new tariff framework, particularly in the critical minerals and energy sectors; and the unlocking of opportunities for African and American businesses in AI and digital technology-based collaboration.



Aid to Trade: The Trump Administration's Bold Pivot

For decades, U.S. engagement with Africa has predominantly relied on traditional aid models that focused on treating symptoms rather than fostering sustainable economic prosperity and viable business partnerships. With the Trump administration's decisive action to rapidly dismantle the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID),⁴ along with several other aid-based agencies, and absorb those functions into the State Department, the pivot from aid to trade has suddenly accelerated from aspiration to necessity. As Zainab Usman recently argued,⁵ this move, designed to be disruptive to traditional assistance norms, calls for a seismic shift in global development toward "industrial transformation." Such a shift will create an opportunity to establish a more sustainable, mutually beneficial economic relationship between the United States and Africa.

The newly announced summit represents a concrete manifestation of this pivot. The administration's six-point plan for boosting U.S. trade with Africa,⁶ which includes making commercial diplomacy the core focus of U.S.-Africa engagement and reforming trade promotion initiatives, directly addresses the need to transition from aid to trade. This approach aligns with the emerging consensus of repositioning U.S.-Africa relations around mutual commercial interests rather than donor-recipient dynamics.

A U.S.-Africa business summit is not a result in and of itself but rather the first step toward showcasing and articulating this new commercial-driven vision where important development objectives previously pursued through assistance programs are now advanced through cultivating trade and investment relationships. As indicated in two recent moves—the administration's foreign aid review, which it says resulted in the termination of approximately 83 percent of assistance programs,⁷ as well as the significant reduction in assistance levels within the president's FY2026 budget request⁸—the president is reinforcing a long-overdue recognition that Africa's future does not lie in

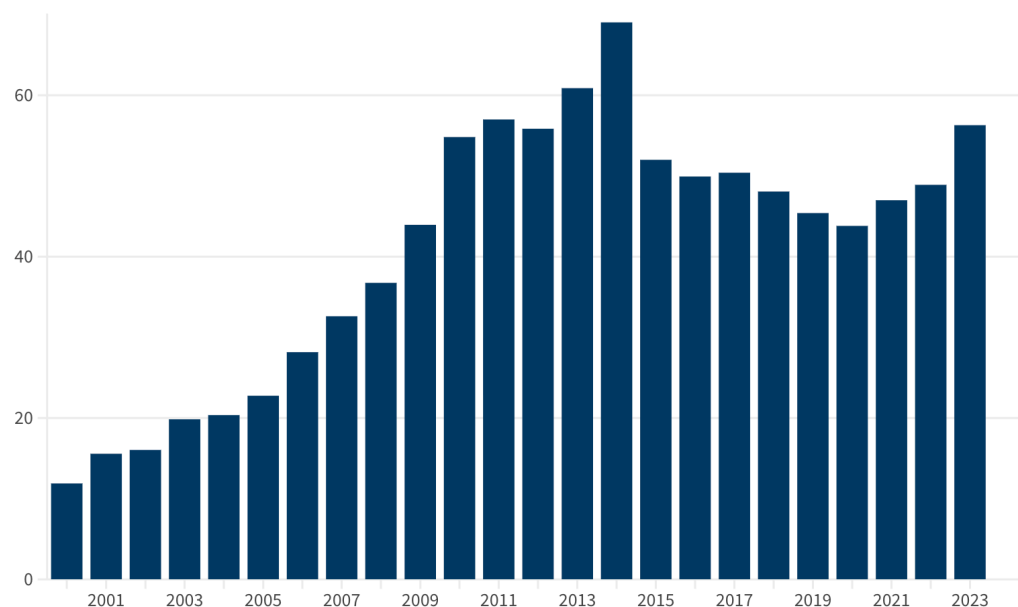
international largesse but in commercial partnership. The president's message raises an important question: Despite the unquestionably good intention of USAID's programs—and the functions and capabilities that are objectively in American interests and should be preserved⁹—has their elimination created space and oxygen for African countries to elevate their game and make the difficult reforms necessary to step into the competitive arena of attracting commercially viable international trade and investment and to harness the power of those capital investment flows to drive their own development agenda on their own terms? It's very possible.

The foundations for and signs of Africa's economic rise are emerging,¹⁰ along with a clear desire to strengthen economic ties with the United States. The signs include the establishment of the world's largest free trade area,¹¹ large-scale projects to bring power to the continent,¹² and significant critical minerals deals with the United States that are looking more likely.¹³ Africa has also seen a modest yet encouraging uptick in American foreign direct investment (FDI) in recent years (see figure 1). As evidenced by the recent AmCham Business Summit in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, at which over 550 million dollars' worth of deals in energy and other sectors were signed,¹⁴ there is clear momentum building for increased commercial engagement. The upcoming summit would provide an even greater platform for African countries to make their case and share their vision directly with the Trump administration and the American business community.

The summit would also offer a reciprocal opportunity for the State Department to outline how its reorganization enhances America's ability to engage economically with Africa. The administration could illustrate how its vision will more effectively streamline decisionmaking, empower regional bureau leadership through integrated diplomacy and development programs, and articulate how commercial diplomacy and private sector engagement is better for mutual prosperity than traditional aid distribution. By highlighting how new offices of assistance within regional bureaus will coordinate with the department's Foreign Assistance and Humanitarian Affairs Bureau to advance American

Figure 1. U.S. Annual FDI in Africa (2000-2023)

Foreign direct investment position of the United States in Africa from 2000 to 2023 (in billion U.S. dollars, on a historical-cost basis)



Source: "Foreign Direct Investment Position of the United States in Africa from 2000 to 2023," Bureau of Economic Analysis, U.S. Department of Commerce, via Statista, August 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/188594/united-states-direct-investments-in-africa-since-2000>.

economic interests, the summit would provide a stage to showcase the Trump administration's enhanced capability to collaborate with African partners with a more focused, results-oriented approach.

Geostrategic Competition: U.S. National Security in a New Tariff Environment

The Trump administration's assertive trade policies, which it says will correct long-standing imbalances and rekindle America's manufacturing industry,¹⁵ also create opportunities to reshape economic relations with Africa. These opportunities for a reset could be showcased at a White House-hosted summit with a special focus on industries vital to the American economy and African development. While implementing protections for American companies and workers through tariffs,¹⁶ the administration has excluded certain sectors from the tariff regime, such as critical minerals and energy resources unavailable domestically, recognizing that

such strategic exceptions are in the country's national interest.¹⁷ These, along with digital technologies, are sectors ripe to prioritize and showcase at the summit.

For example, Africa possesses vast reserves of these essential materials. Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) alone holds approximately 70 percent of the world's cobalt,¹⁸ which is indispensable for advanced batteries. Several other African countries, such as South Africa and Ghana, control significant percentages of platinum group metals, chromium, and manganese—all crucial for American manufacturing, defense, and technology sectors (see figure 2). Countries such as Nigeria and Angola,¹⁹ and newer producers such as Mozambique,²⁰ offer energy resources that enhance global supply diversification. However, China dominates the processing and production of nearly all critical minerals, which represents a national security vulnerability to the United States. Of note, there are promising new technologies emerging in the United States that represent an alternative to shipping minerals to China for refinement.²¹

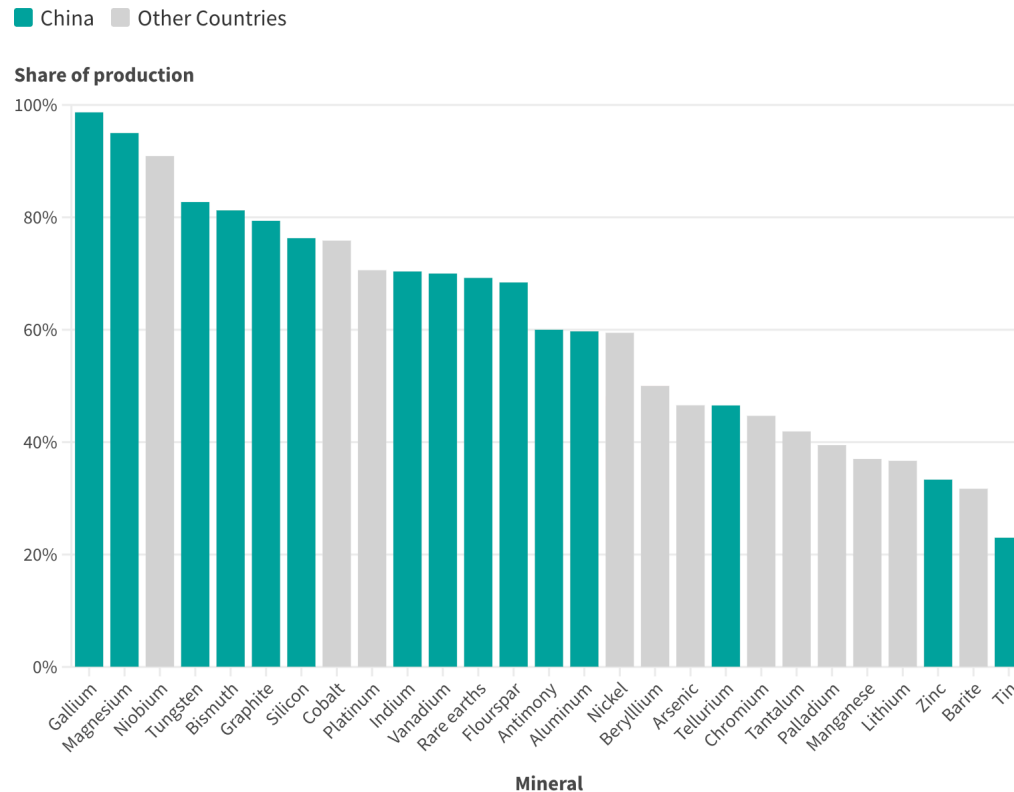
To secure these minerals critical to U.S. national security, the Trump administration has an opportunity to use important trade tools as well as consider new mechanisms. Recent analyses show that the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which is set to expire in September 2025, could be repurposed to expand the trade between the U.S. and Africa in these critical resources.²² Furthermore, since the Trump administration indicated a strong interest in sectoral trade agreements in the America First Trade Policy memorandum on January 20, mineral-rich countries in Africa could be potential candidates on this front.²³ These agreements, guided by a reinvigorated and redesigned President's Advisory Council on Doing Business in Africa,²⁴ could ensure preferential access to crucial resources while creating export opportunities for American goods and services, particularly in

sectors where the United States holds clear competitive advantages. The U.S. Export-Import Bank and the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) should play a prominent role in supporting this effort, and the administration could also lay out its ambitious plans for the DFC at the upcoming summit.

It is well-documented that China has aggressively pursued influence throughout Africa, often through nontransparent financing arrangements that create unsustainable debt burdens. Though initially welcomed, many African nations continue to express wariness of these deals.²⁵ This, coupled with China's economic slowdown,²⁶ has created an opening for American engagement that emphasizes practices and deals that are more transparent, mutually beneficial, and respectful of African sovereignty.

Figure 2. Global Critical Minerals Production Share 2024, by Majority Producing Country

Production share of critical minerals worldwide as of 2024, by majority producing country



Source: "Production Share of Critical Minerals Worldwide as of 2024, by Majority Producing Country," U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Department of the Interior, via Statista, February 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1127203/critical-minerals-production-share-by-majority-producing-countries-global>, original data accessible at <https://pubs.usgs.gov/periodicals/mcs2025/mcs2025.pdf>.

Fitrell's acknowledgment that "U.S. government resources are often too slow, too fragmented and too siloed to compete effectively with global competitors like China" and his declaration that "this changes now"²⁷ is a breath of fresh air for many American businesses that could benefit from partnerships facilitated via U.S. government expertise and support. The upcoming summit would allow the administration to articulate how its trade policies can benefit both American and African interests, highlighting opportunities within the new tariff framework rather than focusing on potential limitations. By bringing together American companies and African governments in sectors exempted from or advantaged by new trade policies, the summit could catalyze immediate business opportunities while setting the stage for longer-term bilateral agreements.

AI and Digital Transformation: America's Competitive Edge for Africa's Digital Future

The digital transformation working its way across Africa represents perhaps the greatest opportunity for mutually beneficial U.S.-Africa engagement. As the global leader in technological innovation (see figure 3), particularly in artificial intelligence, the United States possesses exactly what Africa's young, entrepreneurial population seeks: cutting-edge digital solutions, advanced training, and investment capital for tech-enabled businesses. And for the United States, prioritizing digital technologies offers attractive returns for investors keen to engage in some of the fastest-growing economies in the world.²⁸

Artificial intelligence and blockchain technologies represent a particularly promising area of collaboration. Blockchain and AI-enabled applications can help African businesses overcome infrastructure limitations, digitize African economies and governments for more secure transactions, and support possible government initiatives to de-risk investments, analyze agricultural data for improved crop yields, and enhance healthcare capabilities in both urban or rural areas, among others. American companies lead the world in developing these

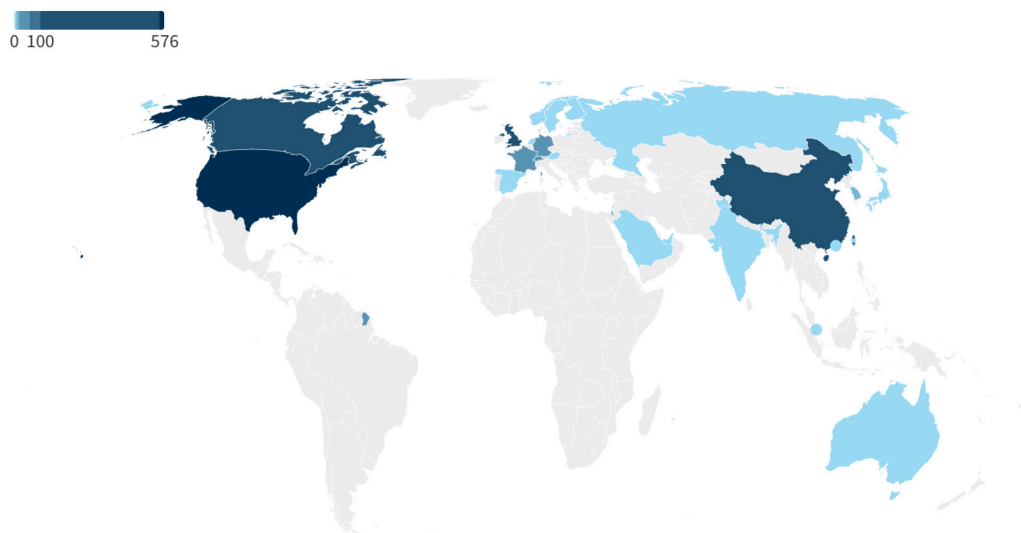
solutions while African entrepreneurs excel at adapting them to local contexts.

A U.S.-Africa business summit would showcase how American technological leadership, particularly in AI, offers African partners more value than competitors' approaches. Unlike opaque models from China that often create debt dependency and heightened opportunities for corruption, technology partnerships build human capital, foster entrepreneurship, and make it much more difficult to engage in corrupt activities. By highlighting American technology and investment firms—such as Newdea,²⁹ Kupanda Capital,³⁰ and Renew Capital,³¹ among others—that are already successfully operating alongside African governments and promising startups, the summit would demonstrate the potential for expanded digital collaboration.

The administration could also announce several concrete initiatives at the summit. It should consider:

- establishing **digital transformation partnerships** with select African nations committed to technology-friendly policies
- announcing an **Africa digital transformation envoy** reporting to State Department leadership but with close coordination with the AI and crypto leadership at the White House
- creating **specialized visa pathways** for African tech entrepreneurs seeking American training
- launching **investment funds** targeting African digital startups
- announcing **tax incentives** for American firms pursuing commercial initiatives in Africa that advance U.S. strategic interests
- forming **research collaborations** between American and African universities focused on developing AI applications and emerging digital technologies suited to African contexts

Figure 3. Number of Notable AI Models by Geographic Area



Source: Nestor Maslej, Loredana Fattorini, Raymond Perrault, et al., “The AI Index 2025 Annual Report,” AI Index Steering Committee, Institute for Human-Centered AI, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, April 2025, <https://hai.stanford.edu/ai-index/2025-ai-index-report>.

Implementation Approach: Making the Summit Successful

For a U.S.-Africa business summit to yield tangible results, careful preparation and framing is essential. There are a few important considerations to include.

Engage private sector leadership. Ensure participation from top American companies and leading entrepreneurs across strategic sectors—such as technology, energy, finance, healthcare, and agriculture. Smaller, innovative firms with solutions particularly relevant to African contexts should also receive invitations. Private sector participation should extend beyond symbolic presence to include specific deal-making opportunities.

Invite the governors and trade offices from U.S. states. The opportunity to close deals would be greatly enhanced by engaging U.S. state-level trade and investment offices at the summit. Governors are closer to and more knowledgeable of the interests and needs of the companies in their respective states and would be able to advance discussions and facilitate deals much more quickly and effectively than federal government institutions.

Ensure proper timing and planning. Ambassador Fitrell, who is retiring in July, indicated the summit may be hosted as early as this September in New York to leverage African leadership attendance at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Proper planning for such an event requires significant time, and UNGA is a notoriously noisy, hectic week to navigate and is not an event that private sector dealmakers typically target. As such, the optimal timing for the event should be carefully considered, and a side event at UNGA is not ideal. A dedicated summit later in the fall or early spring would allow for proper preparation, quality deliverables and announcements, and better assessments of which African countries are demonstrating a commitment to an economic partnership with the United States.

Select strategic countries as participants. Rather than inviting all African nations regardless of economic potential or governance records, focus on those demonstrating commitment to business-friendly policies, key reforms, transparency, and rule of law. Countries possessing critical minerals and energy resources, significant consumer markets, or vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystems should receive priority. The Trump administration should, of course, be transparent and fair in establishing and applying the criteria by which it extends invitations, but the summit should be invite-only.

Focus on actionable outcomes. The summit should culminate in announcements of specific commercial agreements, investment commitments, and policy frameworks. The summit participants should commit to avoiding vague communiqués in favor of concrete business deals with measurable economic impact.

Emphasize two-way benefit. The administration's message should maintain a consistent focus on mutual advantage rather than assistance-themed messaging. The goal should be to highlight how African natural resources, markets, and talent benefit American companies and consumers while creating prosperity and jobs in African partner nations. Fitrell's characterization of the upcoming summit as prioritizing "exchange between partners and relations between equals" reflects exactly this approach.

Showcase a newly reorganized State Department. The summit could act as a debut event to demonstrate how the new State Department structure—particularly empowered regional bureaus with dedicated offices of assistance—will support commercial diplomacy and facilitate business connections rather than simply distributing aid.

Conclusion

The Trump administration's announcement of a U.S.-Africa business summit focused on trade and investment is a welcome development, and execution of a well-designed plan will be critical to success. By hosting African leaders in New York and centering the interaction on commercial engagement rather than politics or aid, the administration is taking a significant step toward redefining U.S.-Africa relations in a way that benefits both parties.

The summit, centered on these strategic priorities, would not only advance U.S. interests but also respond to Africa's calls for genuine business partnerships at a critical moment when traditional aid mechanisms are being dismantled and global trade is being reshaped by new tariffs.

By definitively shifting away from traditional aid delivery systems, articulating the opportunities created by the new trade policy approaches, and showcasing AI and digital technologies as America's competitive edge, the U.S.-Africa business summit could launch a new era of U.S.-Africa relations in a way likely to yield growth and shared prosperity.

Such a renewed commitment to economic engagement signals a proactive and forward-thinking approach, aligns with the Trump administration's America First agenda, and strengthens America's role as Africa's partner of choice.

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