AMERICAN REVISIONISM AND THE CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the likely consequences of American revisionism on democratic governance in Africa. The study argues that the withdrawal of the US from its traditional oversight functions of democratic processes worldwide poses significant risks for democratic governance in Africa. This is largely due to America's shift, under Donald Trump, from the role of global democratic champion to the narrow pursuit of domestic nationalist priorities and a foreign policy anchored largely on transactional diplomacy. The aforementioned situation raises fundamental issues on the sustainability of democratic governance in Africa. Thus the following research question guides the study; what are the likely consequences of America's revisionist foreign policy on democratic governance in Africa. The study is a documentary research and data were analysed using a qualitative descriptive method. The study contends that transactionalism undermines America's ability to superintend over democratic best practices in Africa.

Keywords: US foreign policy, Africa, Revisionism, Democratic governance, Democracy, Transactional diplomacy

Introduction

The United States of America's shift toward revisionismposes a grave challenge to the sustenance of democratic governance in Africa. Since the end of the First World War (1914 – 1918) and effectively since the end of the Second World War, the US has not only been the hegemonicguarantor of the international order but also of democratic governance globally. The liberalist-international framework, as conceptualised by Woodrow Wilson, was intended to ensure the rapid propagation of democracies around the world in order to prevent the

conflagration that was World War I. The temporary failure of this idealist internationalist policy not only led to the rise of fascist regimes in Europe but also indirectly precipitated World War II. However in the wake of that war, the US aggressively pursued the expansion of liberalist internationalismsuch that democracy was soon recognised by global institutions as the only 'credible' political game in town (Hibou, 2002; Hook, 2002, p. 116). For example, 'the White House reportedly pressured the World Bank and the Inter- American Development Bank not to join a June 1989 meeting in Stockholm to discuss aid to Nicaragua and pressed Western European nations to tie economic support to democratization' (Schmidli, 2022, p.219). Concomitantly Reagan pursued 'strategic prudence' and also 'distanced himself from Carter's emphasis on encouraging liberalization in non-communist societies, resolving that efforts to shore up Western security must come first; "we don't throw out our friends just because they can't pass the 'saliva test' on human rights" (Brands, 2016, p.121).Consequently, desperate efforts were made 'to mend relations with authoritarian regimes from the Philippines to Chile during 1981' (Brands, 2016, p.121).

Although the exigencies of the Cold War soon forced the US to review and consequently water down its liberalist rhetoric, it nevertheless continued to seek to project and defend (albeitmainly through words rather than through any meaningful deeds) around the world democratic principles and institutions that broadlyaligned with its Cold War rhetoric 'of self-determination, democracy and human rights' (Noer, 1985, 17). Thus,

America's anti-colonialism and support of majority rule have not been merely altruistic idealism but often have served as means of securing its own international interests. Often the nation has been willing to set aside its opposition to imperialism and totalitarianism for political expediency (Schmidt, 2013, p.15).

This praxis highlights the ideological tension (between liberalism and realism) which characterised US foreign policy throughout the Cold War years.The foreign policy oscillationby the US from liberalism to realism in its foreign policy approach began in the immediate post-war period with the growth of realist inclinations 'within the U.S. government, academia, and the elite press'. Furthermore, 'prominent realists such as Hans Morgenthau and Walter Lippmann discouraged the assertion of global democratization as a key mission of U.S. foreign policy'. They argued that the US should concentrate on its national interests and ignore the 'democratic conduct of foreign countries' (Hook, 2002, p.111). Subsequently,this realist approach was well elucidated in George Kennan's famous containment doctrine of communism and well expressed in Reagan's famous dictum "We win, they lose" (Brands, 2016, p.72).

Following this Cold war policy, the new states of Africa inadvertently became victimsofAmerica's 'containment ideology' which sought to aggressively halt the spread of communism from its stronghold in the Soviet Union(Abouri & Ouzaouit, 2025, p.357). This was calculated 'in terms of the negative consideration that, in the cold war era no piece of real estate can be lightly allowed to drift into the hands of the enemy' (Emerson, 1962, p.304). And so it

was that the Congo's fledgling democracy was ultimately overawed by the obsessive need to prevent communism from gaining a foothold on the African continent.

Brussels and Washington, now convinced of a clear and present danger, formulated a number of plans to assassinate Lumumba. In a radio broadcast to the Ghanaian people, Nkrumah decried "the colonialists and imperialists" who had killed Lumumba, while proclaiming that "African freedom, the unity and independence of Africa and the final complete destruction of colonialism and imperialism," for which Lumumba had sacrificed his life, would endure (Schmidt, 2013, p.66).

The dramatic collapse of democracy in the Congo, with the active connivance of the US and its Western allies, specifically Belgium (Rankin, 2026; Reid 2023;De Witte, 2001; Belgian prosecutor seeks to try ex-diplomat over Congolese hero's killing, 2025; a Belgian parliamentary commission of enquiry concluded in 2001 that Belgium bore "moral responsibility" for the assassination, and the government issued an apology a year later to Lumumba's family and the Congolese nation), was closely followed by ideological conflicts earnestly fuelled by the aforementioned interests, against perceived pro-communist African states across the continent; in Mozambique and Angola,for instance, the US committed considerable resources toward the destabilisation of nationalist but pro-communist governments(Schmidt, 2013, Sherwood, 2019; Harbeson & Rothchild, 1995).

A little over a generation later, internal contradictions and the economic weight of a ruinous arms race with the US precipitated in 1991the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. The reconfiguration of the global power structure due to the failure of the Soviet Union led to a *volte-face*with respectto Western policy thrust in Africa. First and foremost, the Cold War policy of appeasing dictators in Africa was jettisoned, andAfrican states were now admonished to uphold the ethos of democracy.Consequently, democratic concepts which had been deprioritised during the Cold War suddenly gained renewed traction in Western chanceries and institutions. In this wise, successive US administrations have encouraged the proliferation of democratic states and concomitantly increased the focus on issues surrounding governance in Africa (Serebour, 2025, p.282).

The Third wave democratic transitions which swept across the continent at the turn of the last century, is arguably the outcome of the anti-dictatorship stance of the US and its allies (Momoh, 2025, p.48). Since the end of the Cold War, the US has spent substantial resources on ensuring the entrenchment of democracy across the world (Letswalo, 2025, p.309; Hook, 2002, p. 118). In this regard,

the US financial commitment to democracy experienced its first rise with the end of the Cold War, breaching the threshold of $1 billion per year between 1990 and 1993 (measured in constant 2011 dollars). After a few years of regression, spending rose again in 1998 and fell back in the following two years before rising sharply in 2001 (Bouchet, 2014, p.94)).

In Africa, a fundamental aspect of America's democratic engagement was the liberal use of soft power (now under threat from Trump's revisionism) and threats of sanctions against undemocratic practises. To be sure, America's unwavering commitment, until fairly recently of course, to democracy and the ethos of governance has ensured a fair return on its democratic investment to African states.

However, Donald Trump's election to the American presidency, first in 2016 and later in 2024, redefined and remouldedAmerica's traditional foreign policy worldwide. In a word, Trump's approach to US engagement with the global community was hinged on a transactionalist agendawhich is anchored on his much vaunted 'America First' policy (Momoh, 2025, p.62, Jalisa & Dlakawu, 2025, p.81);'America First'is the idea that America must reap comparable returns from its investment overseas.To be sure, the America Firstideology is basically a variant of the neo-mercantilist philosophy.Eric Helleiner (2021, 4) defines 'neo-mercantilist ideology in the pre-1939 period as a belief in the need for strategic trade protectionism and other forms of government economic activism to promote state wealth and power in the post-Smithian age'.Indeed, in contrast to its present revisionist stance, at the end of WWII and even more so at the end of the Cold War, America had enthusiastically championed the liberalist ideology which denounced government activism and instead elevated free trade and open markets.

The 'America First' ideology,therefore, in the light of America's previous expansive liberalist foreign policy, is revisionist. At present, the consequences of the policy are already being felt; subventions have been cut to several important projects around the world, some of which are intimately tied to the furtherance of democracy in Africa.For example, USAID the US 'main channel for democracy funding' across the world (Helleiner, 2021, 4),has had some of its components dismantled together with a 'freeze on US foreign aid disbursements' (Momoh, 2025, p.64). Even more disturbing, America has hardly offered a challenge to the rising spectre of military coups in Africa; a sharp contrast to the previous administration (Serebour, 2025, p.278, 280, 283).During the Joe Biden Administration the US had instituted various anti-terror programmes in Africa,

Additionally, in 2022, the US invested over US$115 million to support economic and development assistance, focusing on democracy and governance. With the rising number of coup d'états in Africa, President Biden announced the creation of the African Democratic and Political Transitions (ADAPT) initiative at the 2022 US–Africa summit (Serebour, 2025, p.282).

And it would even appear Trump 'has little or no interest in supporting democracy in Africa' (Isike & Oyewole, 2025, p.6).This disinterest is highlighted by his 'attempt to close down Voice of America, a news outlet that has promoted US values of freedom of speech, human rights and the rule of law' (Serebour, 2025, p.283).

Added to this, Africa has begun to witness the spread of 'creeping dictatorship' alongside the slow but steady return of the 'Big Men' leaders. These emerging apparitions of a bye-gone eranow haunting Africa were once termed anachronistic in the light of the continent'sspectacular democratic advances a few decades ago. Amidst these growing and portent challenges to Africa's democratic stability, the US under Trump has remained aloof preferring instead to focus, on extracting attractive deals from African states.Beyond Africa, the Trump administration has not only embraced undemocratic governments but has also effusively praised such governments for the effectiveness of their political system (Abouri & Ouzaouit, 2025, p.359). In the light of this development, this paper examined the likely consequences of America's revisionist foreign policy, under Donald Trump, on democratic governance in Africa.

Methodology

This study examined how recent US foreign policy revisionism under Donald Trump may affect democratic governance in Africa by producing a grounded, contextually rich analysis of likely consequences. A qualitative content analysis design was used to explore evolving policy dynamics and their implications. The approach prioritized depth and contextualization, drawing on documentary evidence to identify patterns, narratives, and policy signals relevant to Africa's democratic trajectories. Sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy papers, official statements, media reports, and other publicly available materials. Inclusion criteria required relevance to US foreign policy under Donald Trump, explicit discussion of Africa or African governance, and publication in English. Search strategy combined systematic keyword searches across academic databases and targeted searches of government and think-tank websites; snowballing from bibliographies and media citations supplemented the corpus. Documents were screened for relevance and credibility, and a final purposive sample was assembled to ensure thematic breadth and temporal coverage. Relevant documents were collected and catalogued in a secure research repository. Metadata (author, date, source type, geographic focus) were recorded for each item. A conventional content analysis procedure was applied. To strengthen trustworthiness the study used triangulation across source types, maintained a reflexive research journal, and documented analytic decisions to enable transparency. A key limitation is the relative scarcity of peer-reviewed literature specifically addressing the most recent Trump administration; to mitigate this, the study incorporated contemporaneous primary materials (official statements, policy briefs, media coverage) and drew on continuity with policy patterns from the prior term. Because the analysis relied exclusively on publicly available secondary sources, formal human subjects approval was not required; nevertheless, the study adhered to ethical standards for accurate representation and proper citation of all sources.

REVISIONISM

Revisionism, in its broadest sense, means revisiting and reinterpreting established ideas, narratives, or histories. Thus,in the contemporary periodrevisionism,according to usage and in

the political lexicon, is now interpreted to mean ideas that are different from, and seek transformation from accepted orthodoxy. In this paper therefore, revisionism would be construed to denote the abrupt departure of the US from its traditional liberal-internationalist foreign policy to a narrow, sectional tansactionalism bordering on conservative isolationism.

DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Democracy is probably the most elastic concept in the entire lexicon of political science and perhaps in the entirety of the humanities. The term is so malleable that it can be made adaptable to the needs of virtually any political system (Elvy, 2013, p.48). In this regard, it is also often not out of place to unabashedly hang the cape of democracy on blatantly and openly anti-democratic and repressive regimes. For example, for several years the 'Democratic' Republic of the Congo under Laurent Kabila was markedly politically suppressive, repressive, oppressive and anti-democratic as is the People's Democratic Republic of Korea presently. Thus 'it would appear therefore that democracy is more of a social construct than a scientific construction in which all kinds of social facts are aggregated to mean different things to different people' (Ozor, 2009, p.319).

Consequently,in communist states in which the working classes are theoretically the fount of despotic political power, though represented by the vanguard party, the state was deemed a 'Peoples Democracy'. This 'model excludes ordinary people from governing as government is for the people not by the people' (Ozor, 2009, p.320).In practisethese states operateda closed circuit political system that was conceptualised as 'democratic centralism'. Under the aegis of democratic centralism important decisions are collectively taken within the vanguard party by a very small coterie of party leaders (Ozor, 2009, p.320).

However, in this study we are concerned mainly with the liberal-democratic framework by which we mean inter alia, a democratic system which is undergirded by electoral integrity, civil liberties, rule of law, checks and balances, accountability and transparency, participation and representation. One of the defining characteristics of liberal democracy is its pluralist outlook in contrast to other government systems. Thus, 'instead of a single sovereign power (be it an individual or the general will), there are multiple centres of power none of which can be wholly sovereign' (Roald Dahl 1967, p. 24cited in Ozor, 2009, p.316). Contrary to popular allusions, it is apposite to note that the pluralism akin to liberal-democracy is not the sole preserve of western societies as it is also inherent in 'most complex societies'including Africa (Ozor, 2009, p.316).

Thus, a hostile critic of the liberal democratic experience of the West observed that 'the western assumption of the majority's right to overrule a dissident minority after a period of debate does *extreme* violence to conceptions basic to non-western peoples' (Emerson, 1960: 284). He further contended that the more accepted means of reaching decisions in Asia and Africa is; generally toward extensive and unhurried deliberation aimed at ultimate consensus.

The gradual discovery of areas of agreement is the significant feature and not the ability to come to a speedy resolution of issues by counting heads (1960: 284).

Thus the idea of politics in these societies is akin to that practiced in traditional Africa as Julius Nyerere aptly noted of pre-colonial Africa: in the time of crisis or disputes 'the elders sit under the big tree and talk and talk until they agree' (Nyerere, 1967: 294). Thus, the tribe has made its decision by discussion in much the same way that coalitions functions; this kind of democratic procedures is at the heart of the original institutions of the people (Lewis, 1965: 86).

Furthermore, Nelson Mandela in his autobiography '*Long Walk to Freedom* (1995)' highlighted his early experience with the process of African democracy in Thembuland where he was in the care of the regent. Mandela noted that before any meeting, letters advising these chiefs and headmen of a meeting were dispatched from the regent, and soon the Great Place became alive with important visitors and travellers from all over Thembuland. The guests would gather in the courtyard in front of the regent's house, and he would open the meeting by thanking everyone for coming and explaining why he had summoned them. From that point on, he would not utter another word until the meeting was nearing its end. Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. … Democracy meant all men were to be heard and a decision was taken as a people. Majority rule was a foreign notion. A minority was not to be crushed by a majority … (Mandela, 1995: 21).

It is pertinent to note that in the full tradition of African consensus building, nothing that is said at these meetings breed ill-feelings, for it is believed they were said in the search for a solution. In the case of Thembuland, Mandela observed that the head of the meetings who was usually at the end of attacks often led afterwards in the lessening of the tension generated by the myriad of contributions; 'at the end of the council, a praise singer or poet would deliver a panegyric to the ancient kings, and a mixture of compliments to and satire on the present chiefs, and the audience, led by the regent, would roar with laughter' (Mandela, 1995: 21).

To be sure, in the aftermath of colonialism all African states adopted their late coloniser's political system although they only borrowed in 'part but not in full'. In this regard, the Africans 'borrowed democracy but not the spirit of democracy, the recognition and respect for the rules of the game' (Ozor, 2009, p.329). This partial adoption has led to what the World Bank termed the'crisis of governance' currently being experienced across Africa. The 'governance crisis had its roots in state–society disjuncture, which have historically made the state unaccountable and susceptible to sectional capture, global marginalization, corruption and violent contestations and conflicts' (Osaghae & Osaghae, 2013, p.396). This disjuncture in society has bred pervasive poverty and deprivation which in turn has precipitated a continent wide loss of faith in democratic institutions. In this wise, a '2024 Afrobarometer report indicates that more than half of Africans (53 per cent across 39 countries) are willing to accept a military takeover if elected leaders abuse power for their benefit' (Serebour, 2025, p.274)It was the widespread prevalence of governance crisis which occasioned the equally militant widespread demands for

democratisation in Africa at the turn of the twentieth century (Osaghae & Osaghae, 2013, p. 397).

In sum governance is a system of rules and regulation which characterise the administration of a body politic or organisation.For Ikpi cited in Emome Ezekiel Eregha (2007, p. 207), governance refers to the coordination of governmental actions to enhance institutional performance and coherence. For Eghosa Osaghae & Veronica Osaghae (2013, p. 399), 'governance relates to the legitimate, transparent, responsible, accountable and efficient exercise of power to manage a country's affairs to the ends of development'. These broad conceptualisations of governance'clearly cover all aspects of the complex and myriad relations that exist between a government and a people' (Eregha, 2007, p.207). Thus governance may be broken into 'social, economic and political governance where social governance relates to social foundations and relations with civil society, economic governance to the management of economic institutions and processes, and political governance to matters that traditionally have to do with the business or process of government' (Osaghae & Osaghae, 2013, p.399). When the process of governance revolves around citizen participation then we have democratic governance.

Democratic governance suggests therefore the preeminent position of democratic ethos in the administration of a political system. In other words, 'democratic governance involves governing states on the basis of transparency, accountability and effective citizen participation' (Osaghae & Osaghae, 2013, p.399). And so by democratic governance we mean a political ideology in which liberal principles and praxis are deliberately encouraged and cultivated to permeate and consequently but surelysuperintend and supersedeover all other values.

AMERICA AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In relation to Europe, America's political and economic intercourse with the African continent is fairly recent. Indeed 'by the time the United States emerged as a world power in the twentieth century, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Great Britain had controlled colonies in Africa for centuries' (Noer, 1985, p.3, Emerson, 1962, p.303). The period of active US interest in Africa actually dates to the post-World War II era (Njoku & Oyewole, 2025, 325). This was the period when, following the AtlanticCharter'hailed by some African and Asian leaders as a death warrant for imperialism' (Noer, 1985, p.16), America supported the dismantling of colonial structures across the world. Consequently, 'the speeches of President Franklin Roosevelt, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, and others during the war seemingly pledged America to the destruction of the European colonial empires and the support of majority rule' (Noer, 1985, p.15). Furthermore, Hull urged the European powers to, 'fix, at the earliest practicable moment, dates upon which the colonial peoples would be accorded the status of full independence'(Noer, 1985, p.16). Ironically, this period coincided with the inception of the Cold War which placed the US in 'a dilemma in its policy toward the claims of subject people for freedom' given its

historical opposition to oppression. Thus Roger Baldwin was right when he noted that no matter how vociferous America was about colonialism, that, 'by tradition the spirit of '76 dictates our professions but by strategy the spirit of compromise with the European colonial powers governs our conduct' (Baldwin, 1955, p. 9). Similarly an Under-Secretary of State Durward Sandifer noted that 'America's "traditional policy" supported self-determination and majority rule but also upheld "an orderly and stable" transition of power and continued good relations with Europe' (Noer, 1985, 27).

An 'orderly and stable transition of power' in Cold war lingo translated to denying radical and left-wing nationalists access to the reins of state power in the event of independence (Emerson, 1962, p. 309, Schmitt, 2013, pp. 1 & 13).

As the Cold War intensified, however, the U.S. position on decolonization grew more conservative. Statements about freedom and self-determination focused on Eastern Europe, not Africa or Asia. Although American officials easily could denounce Soviet imperialism and call for self-determination in Poland, they did not extend such demands to the colonies of their allies. … As the Cold War dragged on, American leaders moved toward more active support of continued European colonialism. They submerged self-determination under the larger policy of global containment of communism. Increasingly, America tried to restrain the very nationalism it had helped to create during the war (Noer, 1985, pp.17&18).

This tension between democratic promotion and communism containment was avidly displayed under Jimmy Carter whose fervency for democracy and human rights amid the intensification of the Cold War and the consequent loss of America's 'long-held positions and its ability to influence events' led to his period in the White House being labelled 'a sorry chapter in U.S. diplomacy' (Brands, 2016, p.122).

For Baldwin, this strategy was a pragmatic foreign policy which was starkly in oppositionto the traditional 'spirit of 76'which espoused freedom and liberation from any system of tyranny and oppression.Since America's 'overthrow of British rule in 1783, the United States has repeatedly proclaimed its opposition to colonialism and its support for the self determination of all peoples' (Noer, 1985, p.15). However, during the Cold War,which Allen Dulles graphically portrayed as an 'apocalyptic struggle between freedom and slavery' (Noer, 1985, p.36) andfought under the auspices of the 'containment policy' America wilfully countenanced severalobnoxious anti-democratic infractions and behaviours and even overt and covert violence in Africa.

The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union and the concomitant end of the Cold War emancipated America from itshithertocovert anti-democratic posture on the African continent and globally (Schmidt, 2013, p.11). The first post-Cold War US president, George H. Bush, correctly apprehended the political situation and therefore appropriately declared the advent of a new world order (Letswalo, 2025, p.309) which the US has now distanced itself from under the

Trump presidency (Momoh, 2025, 62) in favour of 'transactional and nationalist foreign policy, characterised by transactional alliances and conditional international engagement' (Momoh, 2025, p.54). Under Trump the US has withdrawn from anti-terrorism programmes in Benin and Côte d'Ivoire (Serebour, 2025) and also withdrawn 'from several key international agreements, including the Paris Climate Accord, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Iran Nuclear Deal), the Trans–Pacific Partnership and the WHO' (Momoh, 2025, p.54). The changing tide of global politics was sustained by its European allies, with more influence in Africa, who declared zero tolerance for dictatorship in Africa (Osaghae & Osaghae, 2013, p.394). For instance, 'at the Franco-African summit held in La Baule, France, Mitterr and unequivocally announced that there could be no development without democracy and declared that, henceforth, French aid would be tied to human rights practices' (Schmidt, 2013, p. 188). Meanwhile earlier,

Beginning in February 1990, trade unionists, civil servants, religious leaders, students, and other democratic forces pressured unelected governments to hold national conferences in a number of Francophone African states, including Benin, Gabon, Congo Brazzaville, Mali, Togo, Niger, Zaire, Chad, the Central African Republic, Cameroon, Madagascar, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania. Civil society organizations demanded that the conferences honestly assess past government practices, evaluate on-going political and economic crises, and write new constitutions that enshrined multiparty democracy and the accountability of leaders (Schmidt, 2013, p. 188).

Consequently, under the democratic pressure engineered in the main by the US (Elvy, 2013, p.52, Serebour, 2025, p.273) (according to Steven Hook (2002, p.109) 'no country has had a greater impact on global democratization, for better and for worse, than the United States during the twentieth century'), the Third Wave democratic transitions began in earnest in Africa. Successive American governments were also anxious to support this democratic journey (Serebour, 2025, p.273) despite a pentagon policy paper in 1995 which had emphatically stated that in the aftermath of the Cold War, 'we see very little traditional strategic interest in Africa'(Westcott, 2019, p.5). To be sure, as early as 1958 a top American official had argued that'we could get along without African commodities and African markets with an imperceptible ripple in our standard of living' (Emerson, 1962, p.303). However, President Bill Clinton who had arrived Washington in 1992 took a personal interest in Africa (Njoku & Oyewole, 2025, p.325). In several ways, Clinton was similar to John F. Kennedy whose death had greatly impacted many African leaders because of 'their admiration for his personal interest in their continent' (Noer, 1985, p.106). Thus, Clinton engineeredthe momentous AGOA policy framework and launched several initiatives to encourage the strengthening of democratic structures on the continent (Njoku and Oyewole, 2025, p.336).

However, at the turn of the last century, the terrorist attack in New York on 9/11 and the consequent declaration of the 'global war on terror' rapidly brought Africa back into America's strategic orbit (Westcott, 2019, p. 5; Schmidt, 2013, p. 213).To be sure, it is important to point out that there is a tendency among US foreign policymakers to respond to Africans and African

issues 'largely as they affected the European situation' (witness the Berlin imbroglio in 1961) or other climes within America's strategic radar (Njoku & Oyewole, 2025, p.325).

After World War II, American engagement with Africa took the form of country-to-country engagement, depending on the US agenda and interests, primarily in relation to countering Soviet efforts to control the region. Although the interest given to Africa was significant, it was less significant than the engagement of the US with other regions such as the Middle East and Asia, especially because of a lack of strategic alliances with the newly independent African countries …The post-Cold War involvement of the US in Africa was mainly determined by the 'politico military' that attracted the interests of the US, making the continent a selectively important actor (Abouri & Ouzaouit, 2025, p.357)

Thus, 'during the first decade of the global war on terror (2001–10), the United States revamped its Cold War African strategy, even increasing support for repressive regimes in strategic states in exchange for cooperation on counterterrorism' (Schmidt, 2013, p.195, Momoh, 2025, p.67).However, alongside this anachronistic cold war stratagemthe Bush administration dutifully proceeded with the traditional US obligations on the continent. The arrest and deportation and subsequent trial of the former Liberian president, Charles Taylor, on corruption and human rights violations under pressure from the Bush administration signalled the intention of that administration to maintain focus on governance issues in Africa. The Bush administration also set up the Millennium Challenge Corporation and the President's Emergency Program for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) (Westcott, 2019, p.5, Njoku & Oyewole, 2025, p.335, Hlase, 2025, 203). His successor, Barrack Obama who is of African ancestry, stayed within the band of traditional American policy in Africa; he launched three new programmes, economic development through trade and aid and renewed emphasis on improving governance (Westcott, 2019, p.7, Njoku & Oyewole, 2025, p.336). For his part president Joe Biden sought to rebuild trust with Africa through his US Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa. The strategy 'identifies four key objectives to shape future relations with African nations: fostering open societies, strengthening democratic governance and security, advancing economic opportunities and supporting climate adaptation'. Although the Biden administration engaged very robustly with the continent many of his pledges to the continent were left unfulfilled (Njoku & Oyewole, 2025, p.337). Nevertheless, Biden made a committed effort to stem the disturbing rise of coups in the continent through the 'establishment of African Democratic and Political Transitions (ADAPT) initiative at the 2022 US–Africa summit'. It was an initiative which aimed 'to enhance America's political and technical support for democratic transitions in partnership with regional bodies, governments and civil societies' (Serebour, 2025, p.282). According to Michael Heath, a former deputy assistant secretary of state for West African Affairs, the ADAPT was geared to ensuring that America does not 'give up on countries that have had coups. We want to continue to maintain open lines of communication and to let them know that if they do take this path back to restoration of democratic rule, there are substantial benefits' (Serebour, 2025, p.282).

Donald Trump on his part has eviscerated the US Agency for International Development (USAID) – the US flagship for the export of American values and norms (Isike & Oyewole, 2025, p.3; Abouri & Ouzaouit, 2025, p.361; Momoh, 2025, p.49).Several key programmes under the USAID, 'including those that promote the rule of law, democracy and human rights in Africa', have been decimated under Trump's administration (Serebour, 2025, p.274). An initiative of Trump's first term, Prosper Africa, which sought to 'assist US companies seeking to do business with Africa' (Njoku & Oyewole, 2025, p.335) was merely a 'geopolitical countermeasure against China and Russia' (Hlase, 2025, p.211) and thus lacked clarity, coherence and funding(Njoku & Oyewole, 2025, p.335; Hlase, 2025, p.211).

US Foreign Policy Under Trump: an analysis.

Donald Trump's first term began in 2017 and ended with his electoral defeat in 2020. During the first Trump administration, foreign policy issues decidedly lay at the 'centre of all debates' (Dimitrova, 2017, p.35). However being a political 'outsider' and a relative greenhorn in politics, there was an initial incoherence in his foreign policy approach (Dimitrova, 2017,p.35, Leonard, 2025, p.153). As Abouri & Ouzaouit (2025, p.360) observed

Trump's previous term was characterised by an erratic approach to governance, where Trump failed to fully entrench his power within the US political and bureaucratic system. … Trump 'floundered' in his first term, lacking both legal instruments and institutional control. While he had many ideas, they remained largely unstructured and poorly executed, leaving core institutions intact. Trump's return to office in 2025 marks a decisive shift. Unlike in 2017, Trump now commands full control over the Republican Party and has surrounded himself with a loyal, ideologically aligned bureaucracy.

However, despite the policy fog, it was clear though, that his foreign engagement would be based on transactionalism, in which 'costs and benefits matter more than ideas and norms' (Sperling and Webber, 2019, p.511, Jalisa & Dlakawu, 2025, p.81).Thus in the aftermath of the gruesome murder of the Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, who had been highly critical of the Saudi monarchy (Isike & Oyewole, 2025, p.4), Trump unabashedly declaimed that, 'the world is a dangerous place … so we need to stick by those who fight our enemies, buy our arms and invest in our country even if they might have killed a few innocent people in the process' (Westcott, 2019, p.9). To be sure, Saudi Arabian hosted Trump's first foreign visit. This transactionalist ideology has since become 'more assertive and calculated' (Leonard, 2025, p. 153) and 'uncompromising' (Hlase, 2025, p.214) thus forcing Abouri & Ouzaouit (2025, p.363) to conclude that 'Trump 2.0 is not simply a repetition of his first term, but an escalation'.

Colloquially, Trump underpins his foreign policy agenda under the populist 'America First' policy which seeks the projection of American interests above other interests globally. In an article in the National Interest review, Trump made clear that hegemonic responsibilities have brought the US nothing but 'national loss and decline' (Dimitrova, 2017,p.35). As a result of this

national decline, his 'America First' strategy firmly repudiates the liberalist pillars of multilateralism and globalism (Dimitrova, 2017, p. 36-37, Jalisa & Dlakawu, 2025, p. 95), based on 'the belief that such multilateral institutions provide gains for America's economic competitors (i.e., China and the EU)' (Jalisa & Dlakavu, 2025, 95). Thus Trump declaimed clearly that, 'Americanism not globalism will be our credo' (Dimitrova, 2017, p. 37). Consequent upon this, the US would pursue, 'wherever possible, bilateral trade negotiations to promote American industry, protect American workers and raise American wages' (Dimitrova, 2017, p. 37). The fulcrum of this neo-isolationist policy is based on non-interventionism except whereof course the US, 'received far higher rents for its efforts' (Dimitrova, 2017, p.38). After all, economic nationalism i.e. foreign policy is akin to business so, 'if we cannot make a good deal for America then we will quickly walk from the table' (Dimitrova, 2017, p.38).

Trump's nationalistic polices is not new in the arena of American politics. In fact it harkens back to the 'Jacksonia tradition' (named for the US President Andrew Jackson)in American history. Walter Russell Mead isolates four schools of thought that have shaped America's foreign policy over the years ('Special providence: American foreign and how it changed the world, 2001'). These schools were associated with the four founding fathers – Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson and Woodrow Wilson. The one espoused 'commercial realism' and free trade, the other sought to 'reduce the costs and risks of foreign policy' (Dimitrova, 2017, p.39), the Jacksonians were a 'large populist school' who sought, 'the physical security and the economic well-being of the American people'. Similar to the 'Trumpians', the Jacksonians have been described as, 'less an intellectual or political movement than an expression of the social, cultural and religious values of a large portion of the American public' (Dimitrova, 2017, p.40). For the Wilsonians, America's foreign policy should be hinged on the moral obligation of, 'spreading democratic and social values throughout the world' (Dimitrova, 2017, p.39).

And so the Wilsonian creed, albeit after a tumultuous inter-war period, became since 1945 the intellectual and policy scaffold around America's foreign policy praxis until the advent of Trump (Jalisa & Dlakawu, 2025, p. 81). This axiomatic rule of international engagement is now being seriously challenged by the 'America first'policy which has been described as the, 'most radical departure from a bipartisan American foreign policy since 1945' and therefore constitutes a challenge to the liberal order' because it comes with a casual disrespect for the norms and values of liberal democracy itself' (Dimitrova, 2017, p.44).

To be sure, some scholars have opined that the 'America First' strategy is an aggressive foreign policy in outlook. For example, Fareed Zakaria has pointed out that neo-isolationism and zero-sum approach in the international system may inflame conflict through the inadvertent creation of a power vacuum,'which will undoubtedly encourage regional powers like China, Russia or Iran to try to take the lead' (Dimitrova, 2017, p.44, Momoh, 2025, p.53). Momoh (2025, p.63) further argues that Trump's intransigent revisionism and 'pragmatic unilateralism'

'carries the risk of geopolitical fragmentation, increased strategic competition and the weakening of liberal international norms that the US traditionally championed'.

Similarly, Sperling and Webber are of the view that the 'American First'policy is as destabilising as 'Russia's disregard for international law and Chinese expansionism' (2019, p.512). Apart from the explicit connotations of geo-political instability inherent in the 'America First'policy, the policy's implicit notion of transactionalism is also disturbing. In the post-1945 era, and particularly since the end of the Cold War America had invested its humongous resources in regions it had very little strategic interest i.e. Somalia and defence of democratic structures in Africa (Momoh, 2025, p.48). However, the transactionalist 'America First' policy describes a situation in which American investment must lead to equal returns for America and her citizens (Momoh, 2025, p.50). Indeed 'economic nationalism is central to the 'America First' agenda' (Jalisa &Dlakawu, 2025, 36). Thus for Robert Zoellick 'America First' 'policy is, confrontational, sets the interests of one actor against others and is blind to the benefits of building systems, where interests can be negotiated and adjusted' (Sperling and Webber, 2019, p.526).

Although Donald Trump's foreign policy approach has been dismissed, as mentioned earlier, as confused and at best pedestrian (Dimitrova, 2017, p.35) or rhetorical (Sperling and Webber, 2019, p.513),Thorsten Wojczewski, for his part, has established a nexus between the 'America First' policy and domestic populist politics in America. In sum, populism is the idea whereby political actors allege, most times untruthfully, that the state is solely invested in serving only the establishment or foreigners to the detriment of the 'common people', the 'man in the street'or the 'silent majority' (Wojczewski, 2019, p.6). Thus often times narratives hinged on false or baseless foundationssuch as the aforementioned allows the populist to claim the title of sole defender and 'voice of the people' who will restore 'popular sovereignty'.

This identity of the populist actor rests, like the identity of the people-as-underdogs, on a process of Othering through which the populist actor is differentiated from the political establishment—typically by highlighting its status as political outsider —and placed alongside "the people" (Wojczewski, 2019, p.6).

Donald Trump is a classical populist politician who uses social media (he has since turned to 'Truth Social' after his ban from Twitter) to espouse his populist politics (Wojczewski, 2019,p.10). Populism in and of itself is opportunisticin nature as it thrives on societal dislocations and widespread prevalence of deep seated grievances such as, 'lack of political representation, equality or employment' (Wojczewski, 2019, p.8). Some of the challenges, domestic and foreign, faced by the US in recent times enabled Trump, using foreign policy as his point of departure, to bind varying groups and interests,'in an electoral coalition by constructing a common enemy – the elite and foreign others' (Wojczewski, 2019, p.12). Meanwhile this populist narrative projected Trump as an, 'omnipotent deal-maker and strong leader who will put the 'American people first'(Wojczewski, 2019, p.14, Odigbo &Che, 2025, p.137). Indeed

populism is successful only to the extent it is able to identify, 'credible others' on whom it can foist the odious stigma of unrepentant parasitism and double-crosserof society (Wojczewski, 2019, p.10). In this regard, Hitler could readily identify the famous 'stab in the back' and world Jewry as being behind Germany's tribulations during World War I and in the inter-war years respectively. For his part, Donald Trump isolated, 'illegal immigrants, US allies who do not pay their fair share and China's' 'economic assault' as being behind America's national ordeal in recent years (Wojczewski, 2019, p.12). Hear him;

Our country is in serious trouble. We don't have victories anymore … we have lost millions and millions of jobs to China and other countries … we are in the middle of a jobs crisis, a border crisis and terror crisis like never before … we are like a third world country … the idea of American greatness of our country, as the leader of the free and unfree world, has vanished … our country in a certain sense is disappearing … the American dream is dead (Wojczewski, 2019, p.9).

Aaron Ettinger (2019, p.1) in an attempt to unpack and systematise Trump's foreign policy framework also utilised the concept of 'populism' in his analysis of Trump's foreign policy strategy. For Ettinger, Trump's foreign policy approach can be understood through the 'popular sovereignty'theory. Populist in outlook, popular sovereignty takes on a Jacksonian commitment to the service of the American 'folk community' (Ettinger, 2019, p.2).Popular sovereignty has three important dimensions; first, the world is composed 'of self-regarding sovereign states looking after themselves as opposed to a world of inter-dependent and integrated countries; second, sovereignty means the duty of 'government to take care of the people's needs'; finally, Trump's integration of sovereignty, 'with the nationalist policy agenda and a legitimate vision of world politics' (Ettinger, 2019, p.11). In sum, populist sovereignty is a 'doctrine of political action and government priorities' (Ettinger, 2019, p.15)and in the arena of global politics, Trump's philosophy is quite novel in the post-1945 era (Ettinger, 2019, p.13). For example, in the Middle East Trump had reiterated that the US has no interest whatsoever in how Middle Eastern societies were shaped but preferred profitable partnerships. This is a break from post-Cold War precedent in which US foreign policy, if only farcically, advocated democracy and respect for human rights (Ettinger, 2019, p.5).

The impact of this foreign policy on the global order is quite apparent. One of which is that it romanticises strength and unilateralism. It is not surprising therefore that since Trump ascended into office, there has been a perceptible rise in demagogic rulers and ideological bellicosity worldwide (Ettinger, 2019, p.18).

AMERICAN REVISIONISM AND THE DISEMBOWELMENT OF DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

As we have noted earlier, since the end of the Cold War the US has expended substantial amount of its resources to ensure democratic growth and stability in Africa (Njoku & Oyewole,

2025, 330/331).In addition, the provision of resources the US also serves as a model of stable robust democracy to African states. In recent times, an increasing number of African states have adopted American presidential system of government.Thus in sum the US has not only beena financier but also a moral compass;an exemplar of democratic success and a political system model to several African states.

Beyond that, the United States may still be held to be revolutionary in the example it sets as the most successful practitioner of the modern rationalized society and economy. In place of the old order everywhere, it promotes the substitution of a new and dynamic economy and a political system which accepts the distinctive identity of the individual, runs by the rule of law, and has at least a reasonable facsimile of democracy in it (Emerson, 1962, p.309).

In fact, while 'Trump has displayed little or no interest … in supporting democracy in Africa', 'despite its numerous inadequacies, Joe Biden's administration developed a US African strategy, made high-level visits to the continent and supported democracy' (Isike & Oyewole, 2025, p.7). To be sure, 'unlike Biden, Trump's foreign policy is culturally indiscriminate of the system of government, thereby offering African democracies and autocratic states similar opportunities to set their relations with the US in a transactional manner' (Isike & Oyewole, 2025, p.7). Witness for example the so-called 'DRC–US minerals for peace deal'/ minerals for security deal with Ukraine in which a 'Trump-brokered DRC–Rwanda deal' and Ukraine peace with Russia was based mainly on US access to rare earth minerals in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Ukraine respectively (Isike & Oyewole, 2025, p.7; Njoku & Oyewole, 2025, p.338).Even his meeting with Kim Jong-un was fully steeped in transactionist theory thus neglecting important issues of human rights (Momoh, 2025, p.53). Donald Trump's revisionist foreign policy clothed in a transactionalist agenda has significantly undercut themorally edifying role that the US has hitherto played in the democratic development of Africa (Momoh, 2025, p.53). As we have earlier discussed, the US under Trump will not commit her resources unless she stands to reap comparable returns.

Trump's domestic actions have also significantly eroded the US' moral high ground with respect to democratic practice. In 'American Nero: the history of the destruction of the rule of law and why Donald Trump is the worst offender (2020)', Richard Painter and Peter Golenbock describes Trump as 'a real threat to our democracy and the rule of law'. They accused Trump of being very unmindful of attackingAmerica's cherished democratic values.In this wise, Trump appears to lack the mutual respect between political opponents which makes American politics so alluring. For example, Trump noted of Senator John MaCain during the Republican primaries:

"He's not a war hero. He's a war hero because he was captured. I like people who weren't captured." McCain, a naval aviator, had been shot down during the Vietnam War and held prisoner for more than five years in Hanoi … This was perhaps Trump's most despicable attack in a most despicable campaign (Painter & Golenbock, 2020, p.298).

Before the 2020 general elections, Trump tried to arm twist Ukraine into indicting his potential competitor and his son of corruption in Ukraine by threatening to withhold aid in the face of Russian aggression (Painter and Golenbock, 2020, p.298). During his first administration Trump was consumed by plots to circumvent America'sdemocratic institutions i.e. the courts, the legislature (Serebour, 2025, p.283). Indeed, when he lost his re-election bid, Trump adamantly refused to concede in the much admired time tested fashion of the US. Rather, he was directly implicated for instigating a mass invasion by his followers of the US legislative chambers, in which several persons were either killed or injured, on January 6th 2020. Recently, Trump has been very vocal about amending the constitution in order to circumvent the two-term limit imposed since after the Roosevelt presidency and solemnly respected ever since.

With such utterances coming from the president of a leading democracy, this could incentivise and embolden West African leaders who seek to entrench their authoritarian (military) rule or manipulate the constitution to extend their stay in power through what is popularly termed a constitutional coup, aggravating the democratic setbacks in the region (Serebour, 2025, p.283).

This predilection by Trump is particularly very disconcerting given that term manipulation is literally a pandemic in Africa's political landscape and thus is a theme taken up by the AU. Furthermore, Trump shows a discernible penchant for autocrats (Serebour, 2025, p.284); witness Trump's tolerance for Moscow and his concomitant disdain for Kyiv (Isike &Oyewole, 2025, p.4)and his delight in the energetic display of state power whilst occasionally pooh-poohing democratic ideals. Unsurprisingly, the current rash of coups in Africa has elicited hardly a murmur of protest from the US.Indeed, the US state department recently announced that its head of its Bureau of African Affairs would visit Mali's capital Bamako to readdress "past policy missteps". The announcement was underscored 'by repeated signals of a much narrower focus on security and mineral resources, with both development and governance side-lined' (Melly, 2026 https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ckglwnrx437o)

Meanwhile foreign autocratic forces are quietly and efficiently filling the void vacated by the US (Hlase, 2025, p.214, Momoh, 2025, p.62).

Whilst autocracy has its supporters, Africa's past excursion into the arena of untrammelled state power has been nothing short of hellish, futile, riddled with political and economic retrogression and generic conflicts. The Nigerian civil war of course was the direct outcome of the military's incursion into politics. In international politics, there is a growing if sublime tussle between democracy and authoritarianism very reminiscent of the inter-war years.

In our era, there is a growing cohort of a society of autocraticstates consisting of Russia, North Korea, Iran and China who are united in an ideology 'rooted in non-interference and strategic realism withoutany governance conditionalities' (Serebour, 2025, p.277). Among this quartet, China, 'after achieving poverty reduction unprecedented in the history of mankind', is

the principal spokesperson for authoritarianism as a viable alternative to liberal democracy (Lagerkvist,2009, p.120, p.130). Thus, China is 'a market-friendly one-party state with a poor human rights record set on a course to deliver the message that authoritarianism works as it alleviates poverty with an all too firm hand' (Lagerkvist, 2009, p.119). This aggressive ideological proselytization by China has led to ahostile policy dichotomy on aid–the 'BeijingConsensus and the WashingtonConsensus'. While the Washington Consensus is hinged on 'the issue of conditionality of aid' based on good governance the 'Beijing Consensus' advocates 'market reforms without democracy and an emphasis on self-determination and sovereignty' (Lagerkvist, 2009, p.125). The 'Beijing Consensus' is supported by views from Chinese intelligentsia which argues that 'Irrespective of the country, it looks as if 'democracy' is not at all the effective miracle drug for every conceivable disease. Having 'democracy' does not automatically mean that there is political development' (He 2005, 375 cited in Lagerkvist, 2009, p.126). A Chinese government official averred that 'China's infrastructure expansion is not as restrained by rules as it is in the United States and elsewhere. According to her, once a plan is made it is executed: 'democracy', she says, 'sacrifices efficiency''' (Lagerkvist, 2009,p.129).

Views such as these and the 'lack of conditionality in aid projects and the traditional strong emphasis on sovereignty by the Chinese government' (Njoku & Oyewole, 2025, p.332) are of course popular with repressive governments in Africa who are perpetually averse to accountability. To complicate the torrid democratic landscape made possible by American revisionism, Russia has made a strong incursion into the West African sub-region, actively supporting military dictatorships (Serebour, 2025, p.275; Njoku & Oyewole, 2025, p.340). She has also offered unconventional methods of military assistance to Sahelian countries afflicted with radical jihadism – filling in the void meekly vacated by France and the US (Serebour, 2025, p.81). Even more pernicious than the Chinese, the Russians are now hard at work in Africa undermining democracy and promoting 'authoritarian narratives in Africa' (Serebour, 2025, 274) through sophisticated digital disinformation such as 'activists and influencers and using fake social media accounts to amplify Russia's propaganda' (Serebour, 2025, p.288). The key targets are governments and populations disillusioned with democracy' (Serebour, 2025, p.275). These activities helped facilitated the military coups in the Sahel (Serebour, 2025, 288).

And so in the final analysis, American revisionism under Trump presents a formidable challenge not only to the consolidation but preservation of liberal-democratic structures in Africa. America's abrupt jettisoning of its traditional guardianship role over, and its support for, democratic proselytization has significantly undermined democratic forces in the continent whilst emboldening anti-democratic characters. In particular, Trump's oft publicised megalomaniac vituperations uncharacteristic of a US president is cold comfort to a continent in which the cult of personality has long been an affliction.It has been rightly argued that 'like development, democratization is not something that one people does for another. People must do it for themselves, or it does not happen' (Ake, 1996, p. 38 cited in Ozor, 2009, p.318). However, as we have tried to show here, since liberal-democracy is imported from the West, liberal-

democratisation is something the West, especially the US must help actualise in Africa or it may never happen.

Conclusion

President Trump's election to the American presidency has proved underwhelming to Africa's democratic aspirations and goals. The 'America First' foreign policy introduced the idea of transactionalism into the interaction between the US and the international community. This development has led the US to seek commensurate profit for any resources it invests overseas consequently causing the neglect of some moral good like the entrenchment of liberal-democracy which the US had traditionally pursued in Africa. This neglect when coupled to the megalomania, a times despotic display of the US president who is often viewed as a democratic model, compounds the crisis of democratic governance in Africa.

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