



**Statement before the
House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence**

“Impact of COVID-19 in Sub-Saharan Africa.”

A Testimony by:

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Chairman Schiff, Ranking Member Nunes, and distinguished members of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, thank you for the invitation to speak on the impact of COVID-19 in sub-Saharan Africa.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a health, economic, political, and security crisis unfolding during a period of heightened geopolitical competition. It presents significant threats to U.S. and African interests.

I plan to focus my opening remarks on the security and geopolitical dimensions of the disease, but I'd like to briefly echo some of my colleagues' insights on the economic and political ramifications.

The Covid-19 outbreak is throttling African economies, erasing the gains made during region's slow and steady recovery from the global economic slowdown in 2014-15. While I have been impressed with the rapid expansion of social welfare programs, arguably the most significant unfurling of social safety nets and worker protections since the early post-independence period, it has been insufficient to quell unrest stemming from the disease. While crime is down, reports of domestic abuse are up. There have also been protests and riots related to COVID-19; at least 567 instances between February 19 and May 16, according to the Armed Conflict Locations and Events Database (ACLED).

The Covid-19 pandemic also is straining the region's democracies and potentially strengthening its autocracies. While there has been a range of responses across 49 countries, the region's governments face three distinct tests on governance, leadership, and democratic practices. How governments meet these challenges will shape their short-term stability and long-term trajectory.

- First, how do you deliver basic services, sustain livelihoods, and enforce lockdowns during a pandemic? The region's democracies have managed it fairly well, but still have come under fire; South African President Ramaphosa has had to apologize for missteps and appoint an ombudsman to investigate allegations of police abuses.
- Second, how do you showcase effective leadership when your political class is uniquely vulnerable to this disease? 21 out of 49 sub-Saharan African heads of state are over 65 years old and therefore at high-risk for severe illness from COVID-19. At least 19 cabinet ministers across the region have tested positive, several legislators and governors, and three of South Sudan's five vice-presidents. Burundi's President Nkurunziza last week died of an alleged heart attack – although most observers suspected it was Covid-19 – plunging the country into a constitutional crisis.
- Finally, how do you balance the trade-offs between democracy and public health? There are at least nine presidential elections on the books for the remainder of calendar year 2020, including in Malawi next week. The COVID-19 outbreak presents an opportunity for leaders to strengthen their grip on power, exploiting health restrictions to suppress turnout or even delay voting. In March, Guinean President Alpha Conde proceeded with

a controversial referendum to secure a third term in office, despite boycotts and the absence of observers.

African extremist groups are outmaneuvering distracted and overstretched domestic and foreign security forces. If these trends continue, sub-Saharan Africa is at risk of losing ground following years of counterterrorism advances alongside regional and international security partners.

Unlike their brethren in Europe, ISIS branches, al Qaeda affiliates, and Boko Haram are not pausing operations or social distancing. Indeed, there has been an uptick in attacks. According to ACLED, there has been a 28.5 percent increase in violent extremist events in the region between mid-March and early May. For example:

- In March, insurgents kidnapped Malian opposition leader Soumaila Cisse; Boko Haram killed 92 Chadian soldiers; and ISIS-linked militants conducted simultaneous attacks in two district capitals in northern Mozambique.
- In the past week, ISIS-West Africa has been on a rampage, attacking key towns across the northeast Nigeria and killing over one hundred people. In Cote d'Ivoire, at least 10 soldiers were killed during an attack on a military post near the border with Burkina Faso.

While African security forces and its international partners are not retreating—as evidenced by the recent death of AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel—it is true that domestic forces are busy enforcing lockdown measures; some international partners are repatriating their peacekeepers, as Ireland did in Mali; or they are dealing with their own Covid-19 outbreaks, with four soldiers assigned to France's Operation Barkhane and 30 Ugandan troops deployed to Somalia testing positive.

These combined stressors are unfolding during a period of heightened geopolitical rivalry in sub-Saharan Africa. The United States, China, and other external actors are responding for altruistic and global health reasons—but also to advance their strategic interests in the region. The United States has largely contributed financially—\$1 billion globally, \$270 million in Africa for Covid-19-related assistance. China, through the Jack Ma Foundation and Chinese companies, has delivered supplies: masks, test kits, and PPEs.

It is uncertain whether either country's approach is having the desired geopolitical effect. African leaders have expressed deep dissatisfaction with both the United States and China.

- Nigerian and Ghanaian officials have dressed down Chinese diplomats for the racist treatment of Africans in Guangzhou.¹ While welcoming of Jack Ma's donations, African legislators and officials are asking hard questions about Chinese corruption, investments, and presence in African countries.

¹ "African ambassadors complain to China over 'discrimination' in Guangzhou," Reuters, April 11, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-africa/african-ambassadors-complain-to-china-over-discrimination-in-guangzhou-idUSKCN21T0T7>.

- African leaders slammed President Donald Trump for negative tweets about the World Health Organization director-general (and former Ethiopian government minister) Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.² Across the continent, there's been an uproar over the murder of George Floyd by police officers in Minnesota.

While far from unprecedented, African admonishments of foreign partners have rarely been as forceful, sustained, or public. African officials probably are becoming more confrontational in part because they fear that a failure to push back (and deflect attention from the current crisis) will heighten domestic public anger in the wake of the disease's mounting death toll and economic devastation.

I believe this new assertiveness is unlikely to fade. As Ivoirian president Alassane Ouattara declared, "there's been a selfishness on the part of industrialized nations for decades."

While there is limited scope to trigger a major overhaul of bilateral relations—in part due to deep structural economic and security ties—the region's leaders are likely to prioritize partnerships with countries they judge to be responsive, respectful, and competent.

I believe there are opportunities for the United States to assist its African partners and restore its leadership role in sub-Saharan Africa.

1. **Steer the global response.** The U.S. failure to lead the global response to Covid-19 has undercut coordination and fueled a wasteful war of words between the United States and China, which has tainted the image of both countries. It is not too late to step up. This type of multilateral approach, led by the United States, was a hallmark of the response to Ebola in West Africa.³
2. **Collaborate on economic relief.** The United States should commit itself to working with public and private lenders to address the region's economic woes. Specifically, the U.S. government should press China to grant some debt relief—in coordination with other donors. There's several options: low-interest loans;⁴ special drawing rights at the IMF,⁵ or something akin to the Brady Bond,⁶ where Eurobonds would be swapped for concessional debt. The key here is that the United States cannot be cast as the main obstacle to a solution.

² "African leaders trump Trump for attack on WHO, back Ethiopia's Tedros," Africa News, September 4, 2020, <https://www.africanews.com/2020/04/09/african-leaders-trump-trump-for-attack-on-who-back-ethiopia-s-tedros/>.

³ "Global response to coronavirus stymied by lack of leadership from the U.S. and Trump," LA Times, April 15, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-04-15/global-response-to-coronavirus-stymied-by-lack-of-u-s-trump-leadership-on-world-stage>.

⁴ "Debt Relief in Africa: A Conversation With Renaissance Capital's Charlie Robertson," China Africa Project, May 29, 2020, <https://chinaafricaproject.com/podcasts/debt-relief-in-africa-a-conversation-with-renaissance-capitals-charlie-robertson/>.

⁵ "The US should stop blocking vital IMF funds for poorer countries," AlJazeera, May 27, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/imf-prevent-covid-19-economic-catastrophe-200521092602809.html>.

⁶ "Next Africa: Will Africa's 'Brady Plan' Work?," Bloomberg, April 30, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2020-04-30/next-africa-will-africa-s-brady-plan-work?sref=D59ibWFx>.

3. **Talk up the U.S. private sector and foundations.** The United States could do more to amplify how U.S. companies and foundations are assisting in the Covid-19 response. After all, approximately half of Chinese aid-like donations globally have been provided through corporations and foundations rather than government agencies. This is starting to happen with the Department of State's "All-of-America" campaign.
4. **Applaud and learn from African successes.** The United States—at the cabinet or subcabinet level—should do more to hail African responses to the pandemic. There is an opportunity to champion Africa's response as well as embrace lessons learned from the region's experiences. This open approach, which privileges dialogue and mutual respect, has the potential to take the sting out of past insults and derogatory U.S. rhetoric.⁷
5. **Refresh U.S. policy.** The Covid-19 pandemic is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reimagine U.S. policies, programs, and public diplomacy. The disease's urban profile underlines why we should rebalance our investments toward African cities. U.S. military engagement on the frontlines of fighting Covid-19 is a reminder that our security partnerships are about more than just counterterrorism. And creative Embassy PSA videos and Zoom town halls are a tantalizing preview of what a modern and inclusive public diplomacy program could look like.

⁷ "Trump decries immigrants from 'shithole countries' coming to US," CNN, January 12, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/11/politics/immigrants-shithole-countries-trump/index.html>.