

Biden's Final Act: The Lobito Corridor and America's Strategic Push in Africa

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Amid rising concerns over the future trajectory of US-Africa relations, President Joe Biden's visit to Angola earlier this month came at a pivotal moment. With Donald Trump set to assume office in January as Biden's successor, the visit highlighted the current administration's efforts to redefine America's engagement with Africa, placing a strong emphasis on infrastructure development and expanding access to critical minerals.

Central to this strategy is the Lobito Corridor project, a multi-billion-dollar initiative connecting three countries that has rapidly become a centerpiece of US Africa policy. Biden marked a key milestone during his trip, celebrating the first copper shipment from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), facilitated by the new railway that promises to reduce shipping times from 45 days to just 45 hours, a development he described as "[a game changer](#)."

Political Instability and Growing Global Competition for Africa

Over the past four years, Africa has experienced more political turmoil, violent extremism, and democratic setbacks than any other region. A wave of coups has swept through the Sahel and West Africa, bringing authoritarian regimes to power in multiple nations. This "[epidemic](#)" of instability underscores the continent's growing vulnerabilities, which have not gone unnoticed by global powers seeking to expand their influence.

Amid this turbulence, Africa has become a [focal point](#) in great-power competition, with the United States' efforts to promote democracy and security increasingly challenged by the growing influence of China and Russia. Both nations have [cultivated](#) relationships across the continent as part of their broader geopolitical rivalry with Washington, seeking to expand their reach in the so-called "Global South."

With its vast natural resources, critical sea trade routes, and the fastest-growing youth demographic — expected to comprise [42% of the world's youth by 2030](#) — Africa offers a wealth of opportunities for global engagement. Moreover, as the largest voting bloc in the United Nations General Assembly, representing [28% of all votes](#), the continent wields significant influence in shaping international decisions. This combination of strategic assets underscores Africa's growing role in global geopolitics.

Amid this competition, [survey data from 2023](#) reveals a shift in African perceptions: China enjoys a 58% approval rating, slightly ahead of the United States at 56%. This divergence highlights Beijing's success in leveraging its economic strategies to deepen ties with African nations, particularly through investments in mining and other critical sectors.

President Biden sought to recalibrate US-Africa relations upon taking office, aiming to move beyond the transactional “America First” approach of his predecessor. His administration's early initiatives included [lifting](#) the Muslim travel ban, [redeploying](#) special operations forces to Somalia, and [hosting](#) the US-Africa Leaders Summit in 2022. These efforts signaled a commitment to “mutually respectful relations,” with new programs designed to bolster security and democratic governance. Biden vowed [enduring engagement](#) with Africa, emphasizing a commitment to working on the continent's terms and declaring that Washington is “[all in on Africa and all in with Africa.](#)”

Acknowledging Africa's growing strategic importance, the Biden administration launched initiatives aimed at countering China's influence, promoting African-led development, and addressing key regional challenges. The August 2022 [US Strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa](#) outlined priorities such as enhancing economic ties through trade, infrastructure, and green energy, supporting democratic governance and human rights, and tackling security threats.

However, despite these efforts, the administration has struggled to maintain influence in the face of rising security challenges and competing powers. In August, as Islamic extremism spread across the Sahel, the US [withdrew](#) its last military base in Niger, following similar expulsions of American and French forces from Mali and Burkina Faso. These setbacks forced Washington to [pivot](#) toward coastal West Africa to identify new security partners. Meanwhile, China has steadily expanded its economic dominance, [leveraging](#) investments in critical infrastructure and resource extraction to strengthen its foothold.

The Lobito Corridor: A Strategic US-Africa Initiative

The Lobito Corridor project stands as the centerpiece of the Biden administration's strategy to deepen engagement with Africa, encapsulating its core objectives of fostering economic growth, promoting regional cooperation, and offering a compelling alternative to Chinese-led investments. This [ambitious initiative](#) aims to transform the corridor into a vital trade route,

connecting Angola, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) with Angola's Lobito Port on the Atlantic. By unlocking the economic potential of Africa's resource-rich interior, the project is aimed at strengthening ties among these nations and supporting broader regional integration.

Part of the administration's larger push to enhance US-Africa relations, the Lobito Corridor also aligns with the goals of the [Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment \(PGI\)](#), emphasizing strategic infrastructure development. The US seeks to position itself as a partner of choice by focusing resources on a single, high-impact project rather than spreading efforts thinly across multiple nations. This approach aims to deliver more effective, sustainable outcomes. Beyond its logistical and economic ambitions, the project underscores the administration's commitment to democratic governance and climate resilience, ensuring that local communities benefit while addressing environmental concerns.

The Lobito Corridor, it should be mentioned, has a complex history. Once a vital transportation hub, it fell into disuse due to Angola's civil war. In the early 2000s, China revitalized the corridor with a \$2 billion rail-for-oil deal, though Angolan President João Lourenço has since criticized the terms as "disadvantageous," especially given Angola's [\\$17 billion debt](#) to China, a third of which was tied to infrastructure loans. The renewed focus on the corridor, however, marks a shift, with the US and European countries increasing their involvement.

In May 2023, the Lobito Corridor was relaunched under the PGI, with the United States and the European Union co-leading efforts to revamp the project. This collaboration includes upgrades to the Lobito Atlantic Railway, technical assistance for environmental and social impact assessments, and initiatives to boost digital connectivity, value-added food processing, and agricultural development. The project also aims to link local farmers to global markets and build logistics platforms to enhance trade and transit efficiency across Angola, Zambia, and the DRC. These efforts are [designed](#) to foster sustainable economic growth, strengthen regional integration, and, importantly, represent the Biden administration's signature initiative to offer a high-standard alternative to China's BRI, countering growing Chinese influence in Africa.

The following chart, drawing on [White House documentation](#), provides a structured breakdown of US aid, technical assistance, and investment pledges and commitment in Africa, with a particular focus on the Lobito Corridor project and its various elements.

Year	Pledge/Commitment	Details
2018	Launch of <i>Prosper Africa</i>	A US government initiative to help investors do business on the African continent.
2019	Launch of <i>Blue Dot Network</i>	An international certification mechanism to ensure infrastructure projects meet environmental and social standards.
2022	U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit	President Biden pledged \$55 billion in investments in Africa over three years.
May 2023	Launch of the Lobito Corridor under G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII)	A flagship economic corridor project connecting Angola, Zambia, and the DRC through rail and other infrastructure, aiming to spur economic development, improve critical mineral supply chains, and promote regional integration.
August 2023	Announcement of the US commitment to the Lobito Corridor	US committed to supporting the project alongside the EU under PGI.
September 2023	Feasibility studies and environmental/social impact assessments for the Zambia-Lobito rail project	Announced during the G20 Summit in India, the studies were a collaborative effort between the US, EU, and regional partners.
October 2023	Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed for the Lobito Corridor	The US, EU, Angola, Zambia, DRC, African Development Bank, and Africa Finance Corporation formalized roles and objectives for the Corridor's expansion.
Early 2024	\$1 million USAID grant	Allocated to assist Angola's Ministry of Transportation.
2024	\$553 million U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) direct loan	Funding for upgrading and operating the Lobito Atlantic Railway, a 1,300-kilometer rail line in Angola.
September	\$40 million DFC liquidity facility	Support for Africa GreenCo, a Zambia-based

Year	Pledge/Commitment	Details
2024		renewable energy company.
October 2024	Launch of the Zambia-Lobito rail project	Anchored by \$5 million for feasibility studies from the African Finance Corporation and a commitment of up to \$500 million in additional financing.
October 2024	MoU signed between U.S. consortium Amer-Con Corporation and ARCCLA	Focused on building silo terminals and collection points for staple crops along the Corridor.
October 2024	MOU between KoBold Metals and AFC	Commitment to provide over 300,000 tons of copper per year from its Zambia-based mine, supporting the Zambia-Lobito rail project.
October 2024	EXIM financing commitment	\$2.4 billion in clean energy projects connecting a million Angolans to electricity.
October 2024	Announcement of EXIM preliminary board commitment	\$100 million for Africell to expand telecommunications services in Angola and the DRC.
October 2024	Agricultural support projects	USAID partnered with Carrinho Group to implement a \$5.5 million program, emphasizing women's empowerment and grain offtake from farmers along the Corridor.
December 3, 2024	Lobito Trans-Africa Corridor Summit	Announcements included new investments to enhance infrastructure, particularly the Zambia-Lobito rail project, and re-affirmation of US commitment to regional development.
2024	President Biden announces \$560 million in new funding	Funding is expected to generate at least \$200 million in private sector investments. This brings total US investment in the Lobito Corridor to over \$4 billion, with total international investments exceeding \$6 billion.

Challenges and Opportunities for the Lobito Corridor

The development of the US-led Lobito Corridor project presents significant opportunities but also faces notable challenges and uncertainties that could affect its success and impact. Central to the project's success is the collaboration between Angola, Zambia, and the DRC. However, aligning national priorities and overcoming logistical barriers remains difficult. Differing customs procedures and regulatory frameworks can create delays at border crossings, undermining the efficiency of the corridor. Without coordination at the regional level, the corridor is at risk of failing to attract international investors and users.

The success of the Lobito Corridor also hinges on its ability to handle a consistent and substantial volume of cargo. While the corridor has the potential to serve as a major export route for copper and cobalt from Zambia and the DRC, achieving this requires overcoming logistical inefficiencies and competing with established routes, namely the Tanzanian Dar es Salaam Railway Authority (TAZARA) railroad — though there is a strong case to be made for [linking](#) the two.

Furthermore, the corridor's impact on local economies will be a crucial factor in determining its success. Without deliberate efforts to engage and benefit local communities, the project risks sparking tensions over land use and competition with existing transport services. Ensuring tangible benefits, such as job creation, improved local infrastructure, and skills training, will be essential to maintaining community support and preventing disruptions.

The economic and political landscape within the regional states presents further complications. Zambia's unsustainable debt has triggered missed payments and required debt restructuring, while ongoing civil conflict in eastern Congo endangers the development of the railway's Congolese portion. Angola remains politically fragmented and beset by rising public discontent, exacerbated by unemployment, the high cost of living, and poor health infrastructure. There is also [divergence](#) in opinions among the region's political elites regarding how close to get to the US, with critics arguing that the US approach might be as exploitative as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The uncertainty surrounding the future of US-Africa relations is compounded by the potential shift in policy direction with the incoming Trump administration. While Trump's emphasis on deal-making may encourage him to continue supporting the Lobito Corridor to secure critical minerals and counter China's influence, his transactional approach could undermine long-term relationships with African nations. African leaders, eager for the project's benefits, may have to wait longer for concrete results. Zambia's rail segment, for instance, remains non-existent, and DRC's President Tshisekedi has emphasized the need for value-added processing of Congo's mineral resources, which is currently primarily done in China.

The transition from aid-based relationships to investment-driven ones under the PGI aligns with the US's goal of promoting trade and private financing in Africa. This shift, along with the Lobito Corridor's compatibility with the [Blue Dot Network](#) — an initiative launched during Trump's previous term to promote high-quality infrastructure projects — suggests that his incoming administration may continue supporting the project.

A Delayed but Promising Effort?

The Lobito Corridor represents an ambitious attempt by the US to redefine its engagement with Africa, offering a values-driven alternative to Chinese dominance. While the project holds significant promise, much remains to be done to ensure that commitments align with results — ranging from the completion of critical railway infrastructure to fostering value-added contributions to local economies. Only by addressing these challenges can promises and expectations fully converge.

The corridor's success will hinge on overcoming political, logistical, and economic hurdles. Achieving this will require sustained cooperation among African nations, careful attention to local community concerns, and unwavering long-term investment commitments from the US and its allies. Beyond logistical progress and financial backing, fostering trust and goodwill through tangible, timely benefits will be essential.

For now, the Lobito Corridor remains a symbol of potential — one that must transition from aspiration to achievement if it is to stand as a meaningful legacy of Biden's presidency, an effective counterweight to Chinese influence, and, most importantly, a significant and sustainable contribution to Africa's development.