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Sub-Saharan Africa: Selected Issues for the 119th Congress

As the 119th Congress approaches U.S. policy toward sub-Saharan Africa (Africa, **Fig. 1**), prominent issues may include strategic competition with the People's Republic of China (PRC or China) and Russia; a resurgence of conflicts and rise in humanitarian crises, particularly in Sudan and the larger Horn of Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the Sahel; and access to "critical" minerals sourced in Africa. Members of Congress may also focus on trade, health and development challenges, terrorism threats, and democratic backsliding. Congress may consider potential reauthorization or reform legislation that could affect U.S. relations with Africa, including addressing the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), or the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). Congress has also shaped U.S. engagement with Africa through oversight and appropriations and defense authorization measures.

Figure 1. Map of Sub-Saharan Africa



China. The PRC has been Africa's largest trading partner for over 15 years, and its trade in goods with Africa in 2023 was reportedly five times that of the United States by value. The PRC has also invested in infrastructure and in diplomatic and security relationships with African governments. China has an established military base in Djibouti (near the only enduring U.S. base on the continent) and is reportedly considering seeking new basing on Africa's Atlantic coast; in 2023 the commander of U.S. Africa Command testified that a PRC base in West Africa "would change the whole calculus of the geostrategic global campaign plans of protecting the homeland." Multiple African leaders have indicated that they oppose reported efforts to compel them to choose between China and the United States. Public opinion surveys vary but suggest generally positive perceptions of both the PRC and the United States among African publics, with China enjoying slightly higher ratings in 2022-23 polling. Among other issues, Members of Congress may consider African countries' sovereign debts to the PRC, trade, diplomatic

relations, PRC dominance of critical mineral supply chains sourced from Africa, and possible basing agreements.

Russia. Over the last five years, Russia's geostrategic influence in Africa has increased as a series of coups in West Africa have ousted pro-Western governments, curtailed cooperation with France, and, in Niger, led to the junta's effecting the withdrawal of over 1,000 U.S. servicemembers and turnover of a U.S.-built air base to the Nigerien government. Russia has expanded its security presence in Africa, providing regime protection and counterinsurgency support in the Central African Republic and Mali as well as deploying forces to Burkina Faso, Niger, and Equatorial Guinea. Russia has sought to establish military bases in Africa; allegedly supported both sides in Sudan's civil war; long served as a leading arms source for many countries; and reportedly engaged in disinformation campaigns and interfered in elections. U.S. officials have accused Russian persons of using gold and other resources from Africa to evade sanctions and fund operations in Ukraine. Public opinion polling in Africa suggests support for Russia fell after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which disrupted Ukrainian grain and fertilizer shipments to Africa, but has since risen, with support reported as high as 90% in a 2023 survey in Mali. Past Congresses enacted legislation requiring reporting on Russian private military company activities globally and influence in Africa.

Sudan. The civil war that began in Sudan in 2023 between rival elements of its security forces has fueled the world's largest displacement and hunger crises. More than half the population, over 25 million people, reportedly face acute food insecurity, and famine is worsening. The warring parties, the Sudanese Armed Forces and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), have been implicated in war crimes and atrocities; on January 7, 2025, the State Department determined that the RSF had committed acts of genocide in Darfur and sanctioned top leaders on both sides. Foreign involvement by the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Egypt, Ukraine, and Russia (which seeks a naval base on Sudan's Red Sea coast) has reportedly fueled the war. Congress may consider whether and how to shape efforts to pursue peace, stem the humanitarian crisis, and help prevent further atrocities, including through sanctions or other tools.

Somalia. In Somalia, where the United States has been involved in counterterrorism efforts for over two decades, Congress may deliberate on the U.S. military presence, engagement with the central government and breakaway regions, and UN support for a new African Union (AU) successor operation to the long-running AU stabilization force in the country. Like its predecessor, the new AU mission is expected to aid Somalia in its fight against Al Shabaab, which U.S. officials describe as Al Qaeda's largest affiliate, and against a growing Islamic State

affiliate. U.S. policymakers may also evaluate the U.S. military train and assist mission in Somalia, involving over 500 U.S. troops on the ground. In 2020, President Donald Trump withdrew U.S. forces from the country; the Biden Administration reversed that decision. In 2023, the 118th Congress rejected a legislative proposal to direct the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Some reports suggest the Trump Administration could recognize **Somaliland** as an independent state, as was proposed in H.R. 10402 during the 118th Congress. Recognizing Somaliland would mark a change in U.S. policy; the Federal Government of Somalia, which holds a two-year term on the UN Security Council, would likely oppose such a change.

The Sahel. Islamist insurgencies, military coups, and Russian influence in the Sahel have posed challenges for U.S. policymakers. In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, ruling juntas have expelled French and U.S. troops (as well as UN peacekeepers from Mali); embraced Russian defense cooperation; and withdrawn from the Economic Community of Western States (ECOWAS) to form their own Russian-backed alliance. State security forces, allied militias, and Russian personnel have been implicated in reported mass atrocities in Mali and Burkina Faso, as have Islamist militant groups. Congress may consider the impact of these developments on coastal West Africa, which the Biden Administration designated as a focus of engagement under the Global Fragility Act (Title V of Division J, P.L. 116-94), in addition to considering policy options in the wake of coups and the cessation of prior U.S. and regional security initiatives.

Critical Minerals. Africa reportedly contains more than half the world's cobalt known reserves, most in the DRC; nearly half its manganese; over a fifth of its graphite; and large quantities of other U.S.-designated "critical" minerals. China is a top destination for Africa's raw mineral exports. The Biden Administration expressed concern over China's "dominant position in cobalt mining and processing of materials" from the DRC and supported the Lobito Corridor, a U.S. and G7-aided trade and investment rail corridor linking DRC, and prospectively Zambia, to an Angolan port. A Rwandan-backed rebellion in eastern DRC has affected global supply chains of certain critical minerals such as tantalum. The 118th Congress considered bills that would have characterized the actions of PRC mining companies as harmful to the Congolese, imposed trade restrictions in response to alleged human rights abuses at DRC cobalt mines, and required U.S. strategies to respond to these and related issues. The 119th Congress may consider whether or not legislation or oversight measures may help meet U.S. critical mineral needs, promote U.S. trade and investment, or advance other U.S. goals.

Foreign Assistance. Congress authorizes, appropriates, and oversees U.S. foreign assistance for Africa, which is often the top regional recipient of aid each year. Excluding emergency humanitarian assistance, U.S. bilateral aid for Africa totaled nearly \$8 billion in FY2023 appropriations, roughly consistent with annual allocations over the previous decade. Around 70% of such aid has supported health programs, led by HIV/AIDS assistance. Other U.S. bilateral

aid has supported economic growth, education, security, and environmental conservation. African countries have been top recipients of U.S. humanitarian funds and multilateral assistance.

PEPFAR. Congress created PEPFAR in 2003 through the United States Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Act (P.L. 108-25), and amended and extended PEPFAR's authorization in 2008, 2013, and 2018. In 2024, after debating a multi-year reauthorization, Congress extended some expiring PEPFAR provisions through March 2025 via P.L. 118-47. As of February 2025, the State Department reports that the PEPFAR program, which has focused substantially on Africa, has saved over 26 million lives and enabled 7.8 million babies to be born HIV-free. The 119th Congress may consider some issues that emerged in prior congressional debates. These could include country graduation or financing; abortion-related provisions; support for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Malaria, and Tuberculosis; the role of PEPFAR in enabling broader health security and pandemic preparedness; or other goals, spending directives, or impact analysis.

AGOA. AGOA, enacted in 2000 (Title I of P.L. 106-200, as amended), has provided nonreciprocal duty-free access to the U.S. market for eligible African countries. African countries exported \$9.3 billion worth of goods in 2023 under AGOA, which Congress reauthorized through September 2025 under the Trade Preference Extension Act of 2015 (P.L. 114-27). If the 119th Congress considers AGOA reauthorization, possible issues may include country eligibility criteria; the relative merits of unilateral trade benefits vs. reciprocal free trade agreements; third-country fabric provisions; and potential options to incentivize U.S. investments, including in the critical minerals sector. South Africa's AGOA eligibility may be a consideration for Congress: its relations and security cooperation with the PRC and Russia, pursuit of genocide charges against Israel at the International Court of Justice, and upper middle-income status may be examined, as might the impact of its possible exclusion on other countries.

Other Economic and Development Initiatives. Congress may consider whether to reauthorize or otherwise address the DFC (first authorized in 2018) or the MCC (first authorized in 2004), both impactful in Africa. Africa was the DFC's most active region as of 2024, and has received 58% of MCC cumulative funding to date. Members may also assess Prosper Africa, an initiative launched by President Trump to boost U.S.-Africa trade, U.S. support for the African Continental Free Trade Area, and Global Fragility Act implementation, among other issues.

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