

US–AFRICA TRADE: AN UNFINISHED STORY

All else being equal, simply being a country on the African continent reduces U.S. exports by 52% and U.S. imports by 82%. For China, the same African location produces a 15% export premium. This preview of forthcoming ONE research sets out what that asymmetry has produced over twenty-five years, and what the United States can do about it now.

THE TRADE ASYMMETRY, IN THREE NUMBERS

–52%

Reduction in U.S. exports to a country, all else equal, simply because it is in Africa.

–82%

Reduction in U.S. imports from a country, all else equal, simply because it is in Africa.

+15%

Increase in Chinese exports to an African country compared to other regions.

Source: ONE Campaign analysis of Comtrade data, 2000–2024.

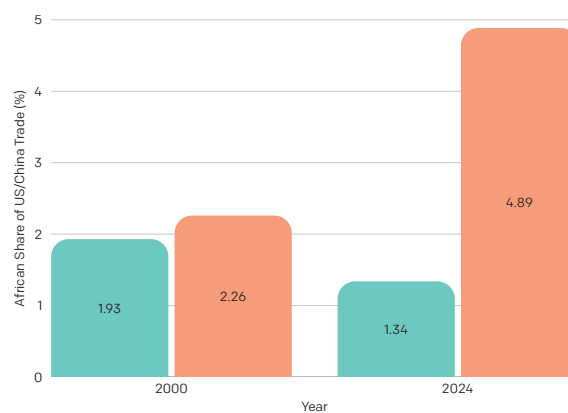
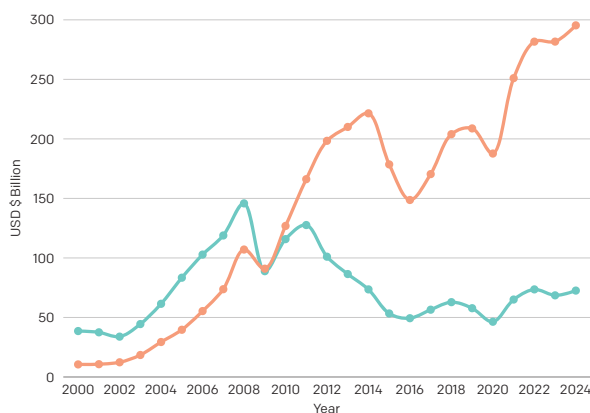
KEY MESSAGES

- The trade asymmetry is structural and quantifiable. African countries face a measurable U.S. trade penalty (–52% exports, –82% imports) and a Chinese trade premium (+15% exports). This is not a perception. It is what bilateral data shows after controlling for other factors.
- China has built a 25-year lead while the U.S. stood still. Since 2000, China–Africa trade has grown more than 25-fold, from \$11 billion to \$295 billion. U.S.–Africa trade has grown 88%, from \$39 billion to \$73 billion. The U.S. began the century with a 3-to-1 advantage. It now trades at one-quarter of China’s volume on the continent.
- The administration’s “Trade over Aid” framing is an opening. If implemented through concrete trade-facilitation steps, it can move U.S.–Africa engagement onto more sustainable footing. If left as a declaration of principles, it accelerates the trajectory documented in this preview.

Shared prosperity is the strategic case, not the moral one. Africa is the fastest-growing region in the world. By 2050, one in four people on the planet will be African. Deeper U.S.

trade engagement on the continent advances U.S. economic and security interests, not only African development outcomes.

Over the past two decades, China's trade with Africa has risen while the U.S. has fallen behind



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At the start of the new millennium, US trade with Africa was more than three times the size of China-Africa trade. Over the following 25 years, that picture inverted. Two-way trade between the United States and Africa grew by 88%, from \$39 billion in 2000 to \$73 billion in 2024. Over the same period, China's trade with the continent grew approximately 25-fold, from \$11 billion to \$295 billion.

Recognizing the economic and developmental benefits of trade engagement, the United States enacted the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) in 2000 with broad bipartisan support. AGOA provides eligible African countries with duty-free access to the US market for thousands of products.

“Trade and investment that is in the interest of these countries is also in the interest of ours.”

– Senator William Roth (R-DE), *floor debate on the African Growth and Opportunity Act, 2000*

Following AGOA's adoption, two-way trade between the United States and Africa rose sharply while China was still behind. Growth was driven primarily by U.S. imports of crude oil from major African producers such as Nigeria and Angola. AGOA also supported growth in non-oil exports including apparel, textiles, and automotives, with Lesotho, Kenya, Madagascar, and South Africa using reduced tariff access to expand their manufacturing sectors.

Following the 2008 global financial crisis, U.S.–Africa trade dropped sharply. Reduced demand and falling commodity prices coincided with the U.S. shale revolution, which cut U.S. reliance on imported African oil. Despite continued AGOA success stories, U.S.–Africa trade remained heavily concentrated in extractive commodities rather than diversifying into higher-value goods. U.S. exports to Africa grew threefold over the period; Chinese exports to the region grew 36-fold.

CHINA HAS CAPITALIZED ON AFRICA'S POTENTIAL

China's expansion in Africa reflects more than its broader integration into the global economy. Africa is a more important trading partner to China than to other major economies. Africa's share of China's total global trade more than doubled between 2000 and 2024, from 2.3% to 4.9%. Over the same period, Africa's share of total U.S. trade fell from 1.9% to 1.3%.

All else equal, simply being a country on the African continent reduces U.S. exports by 52% and U.S. imports by 82%. Chinese exports to African countries are 15% higher than to comparable countries elsewhere. Africa faces a U.S. trade penalty and a Chinese trade premium.

Beijing's sustained economic diplomacy on the continent, primarily through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has built durable trade relationships. African countries that have benefited from BRI import 26% less in manufactured goods from the United States than would otherwise be expected. The pattern is consistent: where China has invested in trade infrastructure and bilateral economic ties, U.S. market share has receded.

AFRICA AS OPPORTUNITY, NOT RISK

Africa is the fastest-growing region in the world. By 2050, one in four people on the planet will be African. The continent is projected to grow faster than Asia in 2026 (4.5% vs 4.1%). The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is now the largest free trade area in the world, connecting 1.3 billion people across 54 countries.

The trajectory will widen further without a course correction. Current U.S. tariff policies add a 10–15% duty on many African imports. China recently implemented a zero-tariff policy for all but one African country. Combined with the uncertainty created by AGOA's one-year renewal in January 2026, the conditions are set for African trade to divert further toward China.

“Africa’s growing economic weight is a strategic market that the United States is increasingly absent from. Investing in the trade relationship advances both our economic interest and African development. The two are not in tension. The case for deeper engagement is strategic, not philanthropic.”

– Elizabeth Hoffman, *Executive Director, ONE*

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Trump administration's "Trade over Aid" initiative provides a frame for renewed U.S. engagement. To make that frame substantive, the administration should take the following steps.

1. **Renew AGOA for a long-term period before its expiration at the end of 2026.** The current one-year renewal does not provide the certainty African manufacturers, including those in Lesotho, Kenya, and Madagascar, require to invest. A ten-year renewal would restore AGOA's original intent of providing predictable, long-term market access.
2. **Move "Trade over Aid" from declaration to action.** Concrete steps include expanding the number of commercial officers at U.S. embassies on the continent, increasing official trade delegations, removing remaining tariff barriers to African imports, and increasing resources to the U.S. Trade and Development Agency to streamline regulatory frameworks.
3. **Sustain the Development Finance Corporation's Africa portfolio.** The DFC's reauthorization raised its maximum contingent liability from \$60 billion to \$205 billion, significantly expanding its lending capacity. The DFC should continue to dedicate at least 25% of its portfolio to investments in sub-Saharan Africa, consistent with its 2024 and 2025 portfolio share. High-opportunity markets include Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal.
4. **Reestablish regional trade and investment hubs.** Previously funded by USAID, these hubs functioned as on-the-ground points of contact for U.S. businesses pursuing African opportunities. Their absence is a tangible barrier to the trade growth the administration's framing seeks to encourage.
5. **Position U.S. companies to compete for multilateral development bank-financed projects.** The African Development Bank and the World Bank finance major infrastructure projects across the continent. U.S. companies remain underrepresented in winning bids. The Department of Commerce and the U.S. Trade Representative should establish a coordinated effort to improve U.S. company access to these procurement pipelines.

WHAT'S COMING IN THE FULL REPORT

This preview sets out the pressing challenges facing the U.S.-Africa trade relationship. The forthcoming full ONE Campaign report will go deeper on three dimensions:

- **Country-level analysis.** Bilateral trade trajectories for the top fifteen U.S. trading partners on the continent
- **Sectoral opportunity mapping.** Identification of the sectors where U.S. companies retain comparative advantage and where targeted policy interventions could most effectively expand trade.
- **The BRI effect, quantified.** Detailed analysis of how Chinese infrastructure investment translates into trade displacement, and what comparable U.S. infrastructure engagement through the DFC and partner mechanisms could produce.

ABOUT THIS PREVIEW

Released by ONE Campaign for Africa Day 2026. Data used is from the Comtrade database with analysis support from Ciuriak Consulting. The full report on U.S.–Africa trade and shared prosperity will follow later in 2026. For media inquiries, contact media@one.org. For policy inquiries, contact the ONE Campaign Policy team.

